

Pathways

*An Archive of Online Articles on
Christian Living & Emotional Healing*

Cate Russell-Cole



Pathways: An Archive of Online Articles on Christian Living and Emotional Healing

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Written in Australian English to Australian grammar and punctuation standards.

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Introduction

Pathways is a collection of best of the Christian articles I have written between 1995 and 2016. It is a 'legacy' ebook which has been prepared for The Internet Archive. Most of these articles are also available on my Faithwriters account. (<http://www.faithwriters.com/member-profile.php?id=67511>)

In 1995 I began to write psychology-based relationship, emotion and Christian living feature articles, for Christian newspapers and magazines in Australia. By 1997, I was writing for International websites and in 1999, I started my first Christian web site, named "Pathways Christian Writers Resources." This book has been named to honour that first site, which was designed to equip and empower Christian writers, who were discovering the then, new world of the Internet.

As these articles have been written over a twenty year period, you will find inconsistencies in style... and if you've read my work on King David, you'll see that my style has most certainly changed and improved! There will most probably also be errors where the early articles went through conversions from Lotus Notes, then several Microsoft formats. Every effort has been made to find these bloopers, but some are found to have still slid through the cracks.

Many of these articles were written for outreach publications, and thus, are not heavily 'preachy.' Regardless, this is a non-denominational Christian book. It may not suit more individualised Christian sectors and will not be useful for other religions.

May the Lord bless the work of your hands and the desires of your heart, as you continue to seek Him.

Cate Russell-Cole
Brisbane, Australia 2016

Where to Find Cate Online

Due to ill health, my time on the computer has to be minimal. You are welcome to leave a comment on a status on the King David Project Facebook page and if able, I will get back to you.

2016 Online Activity:

- The King David Project **Web Site** on Wix: <http://cateartios.wix.com/kingdavidproject>
- The King David Project's "Masada Rain" **Blog**: <https://masadarain.wordpress.com> (Comments are switched off.)
- From Despair to Deliverance **Facebook** page: <https://www.facebook.com/fromdespairotdeliverance>
- The King David Project / Masada Rain on **Pinterest**: <https://www.pinterest.com/MasadaRain/> (See this profile for free Psalm images.)
- **Cate's Private Web Site** (Online until 2018) <http://www.cateartios.net>



When the Prayer of Jabez Hasn't Worked for You

When I get to Heaven, I want to meet Jabez and see what he is like, because he sounds like an exceptionally special man, with a beautiful character.

"There was a man named Jabez who was more honourable than any of his brothers. His mother named him Jabez because his birth had been so painful. He was the one who prayed to the God of Israel, 'Oh, that You would bless me and expand my territory! Please be with me in all that I do, and keep me from all trouble and pain!' And God granted him his request." 1 Chronicles 4:9-10

Years ago, friends came to me and said, "you HAVE to read this book! This prayer of Jabez will change your life." I had stopped reading Christian books earlier, as I found I was depending on them more than on the Word of God, but I did look up the prayer and thought, "wow. I can see why this book is popular." To be kept from all trouble and pain, know God and be blessed materially, who wouldn't want that? Then I noticed that a lot of posters and gift items with the prayer of Jabez were appearing in our local Christian book shop. I had to decide, was this prayer a fad, or a really good idea?

For Jabez, this prayer is the best idea he ever had and his prayer inspires me. However, I never prayed the prayer, as it's not my prayer. It demonstrates a way of praying that could be beneficial... however, and this is where it all falls apart in our lives, as I don't have the character of Jabez, God could not produce the same results in my life without me becoming a spoiled brat. I know I would lose touch much of my motivation to seek the Lord, because I was so blessed, I didn't need Him as much. Plus how many critical lessons do we learn from pain, like it or not? An easy life didn't sound wise to me.

God is a pro-level Father. He would never, ever, give a gift to any of His children that would harm them, or pull them away from Him to any degree. Neither will He do anything that stops us from making our own decisions and often, subsequent mistakes. I am a master of the art of getting myself into trouble and because of free will, there is a limit to what God can halt in my life. Even if God was answering my prayer in the same way He blessed Jabez, my own life choice bloopers could effectively erode away what God was trying to give me.

So what can we learn from Jabez? To be honourable. What does that mean? According to several dictionaries, it means to have high standards, be deserving, be consistently righteous so that you are worthy of praise and it won't go to your head. It means being a person who is fair, courteous, respectful, lawful, unselfish, actively resisting corruption and sin, and to have integrity. Honour is built on submission to God, obeying the Word of God and showing the fruit of the Spirit to everyone, regardless of whether they are deserving or not. It's a hard thing to achieve.

So be comforted. The Lord has heard your prayers and done what is best for you. He will be working in the background to bring about His perfect, loving will for your life and if you submit to Him, you'll thrive. What comes may not look like what Jabez had, but it doesn't have to. It will be specially, carefully, tailor made FOR YOU by the Father who knows you so well. That is a greater act of love than simply making your life easy.



Returns for Our Faith: Examining What We Expect From God

In 2000, I had the pleasure of talking to a Messianic Rabbi about where I felt the church was heading. At that time, my life and faith were both dramatically changing, and as a result, I was really frustrated in my church life. Everything was the same old, same old. Where I wanted to press in deeper to God, I felt held back. I was taking a fresh look at what I had taken for granted for many years, and what bothered me the most, was how we were treating the Lord.

I told the Rabbi that we were treating God like a vending machine. We inserted:

- a) time in church, and/or
- b) tithes and gifts, and/or
- c) the expected praise and worship, and/or
- d) the expected Bible study, and/or
- e) the expected prayer...

... then we expected God to spit out blessings, healing and deliverance in return, as we'd done what the Word said to do.

But what about the times when prayers didn't get answered, no matter how obedient we were? What then? What about when God seemed to be saying, "no." But... but we'd done what was asked and expected, so where were our answers? I knew Christians that were confused by that, and in the past I had been too.

Let me take you back further to 1989, when after being offered life insurance, a Christian friend of mine said, "I don't need insurance, I've got God!"

She was right, however, she was also wrong. Reliance on the Lord is the ultimate faith, however, she was in danger of turning the Lord into an insurance policy. It was again, taking faith and turning it into a contractual arrangement.

The Lord loves to give to His children. Jesus said: *"keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. You parents if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask Him."* Matthew 7:7-11

We can seek, yet a balance is needed. One day after school, I came home and found that my parents had been shopping. Often they'd bring me back some small thing, but this day, I asked outright what I had gotten and was told, it was nothing. My mother angrily informed me later, that she had gotten me a treat, but because I got greedy, she acted as any wise parent would, and held it back. Can we get so greedy with the Lord, that He sometimes finds it wise to do the same? This may be one of the many answers.

The strongest people in the Bible, are those who loved God unconditionally through sheer hell. I am referring to Moses, Job, John the Baptist, Paul and King David. All of them lived out their faith the hard way. They went through the most severe trials, not just discomfort, all because they were serving God. At times answers did not come, or were delayed.

"Just then a hand touched me and lifted me, still trembling, to my hands and knees. And the man said to me, "Daniel, you are very precious to God, so listen carefully to what I have to say to you. Stand up, for I have been sent to you." When he said this to me, I stood up, still trembling. Then he said, "Don't be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day you began to pray for understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your request has been heard in heaven. I have come in answer to your prayer. But for twenty-one days the spirit prince of the kingdom of Persia blocked my way. Then Michael, one of the archangels, came to help me, and I left him there with the spirit prince of the kingdom of Persia. Now I am here to explain what will happen to your people in the future, for this vision concerns a time yet to come." Daniel 10:10-14

"Though He slay me, I will hope in Him." Job 13:15a

Just because you are a Christian, don't expect to get it easy, or to get everything you want. Being a child of God is about being faithful and devoted to your Heavenly Father, no matter what.

We don't believe to receive, we believe because we know and love God.

In John 16:33 Jesus said plainly, *"I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."* Because of the sin in the world, that applies to all of us, no exceptions.

"So if you are suffering in a manner that pleases God, keep on doing what is right, and trust your lives to the God who created you, for he will never fail you." 1 Peter 4:19

"The righteous person faces many troubles, but the LORD comes to the rescue each time." Psalm 34:9

So despite the temptation to believe in any theology that gives us a promise of a guaranteed answer, whether that be prosperity, healing or any blessing, we have to bite the bullet and be prepared for life to be rough at times. It does not mean we haven't pleased God, or that we aren't overcomers; neither does it mean that the Lord has deserted us. There is nothing to be gained by blaming ourselves, or God, for falling short of impossible standards of quick victory. Moses had bad days, as did David. [Refs: Numbers 11:10-15 and Psalm 6:1-7] They were both honest with God and knew that in good time, answers would come. If you have read the full accounts of their lives, you'll know that God did fulfil His promises and care for all their needs. They are our role models. The same principles apply equally to our lives.

The secret to success is not in any specific Bible verse or prayer, it is in our genuine love for the Lord, which motivates us to stay close to Him - no matter what.

*"Let all that I am wait quietly before God,
for my hope is in Him.
He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress where I will not be shaken.
My victory and honour come from God alone.
He is my refuge, a rock where no enemy can reach me.
O my people, trust in Him at all times.
Pour out your heart to Him,*

for God is our refuge." Psalm 62:5-8



The Misunderstood Jonah

Jonah is one of the most miserable, disobedient, ungrateful, graceless people in the Bible. That is quite a series of judgements on someone I can't be totally fair about, because my understanding of him is limited to the scarce information given; yet it appears fair. Throughout the book of Jonah, all we see is Jonah running from obeying the Lord, being forgiven and glued back together, then he responds with the kind of character that we find appalling.

This change of plans greatly upset Jonah, and he became very angry. So he complained to the LORD about it: *"Didn't I say before I left home that you would do this, LORD? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people. Just kill me now, LORD! I'd rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen."* The LORD replied, *"Is it right for you to be angry about this?"* Jonah 4:1-4

I can't defend Jonah, I am not even going to try to. We're all familiar with the story and some of us, relate to it a little too well. What I do want to focus on is when you take into account the culture of the time, (which includes attitudes that last pasted Jesus' time, and some are still in evidence among the Ultra Orthodox Jews today), the story takes on a whole new dimension. You can understand Jonah's feelings and motivations at a greater depth. (Whale and sea puns are not intended.)

Acts 10:28a starts to explain part of Jonah's repulsion at going to Ninevah, a godless city, outside of Isra'el's borders. *"Peter told them, "You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you."* [Cross reference: Leviticus 7:21]

Now we know Peter is one of the godly, good guys, so why would he baulk at visiting Cornelius in his home? Because Cornelius is a Gentile: a foreigner and an unbeliever. This is a really big deal. Throughout the Torah, Moses repeatedly tells the nation of Isra'el: *"Completely destroy them, the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites as the Lord your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God."* Deuteronomy 20:17-18 [Also Numbers 33:50-56, Deuteronomy 7:6]

"Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left. Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them. But you are to hold fast to the Lord your God, as you have until now. "The Lord has driven out before you great and powerful nations; to this day no one has been able to withstand you. One of you routs a thousand, because the Lord your God fights for you, just as he promised. So be very careful to love the Lord your God.

But if you turn away and ally yourselves with the survivors of these nations that remain among you and if you intermarry with them and associate with them, then you may be sure that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you. Instead, they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land, which the Lord your God has given you." Joshua 23:6-13

The greatest risk to Isra'el's people was other gods, and the quickest route to them was through the company of foreigners and/or marrying foreign wives. This occurred at one stage on the way to the Promised Land, and those guilty were put to death, to save the rest of the young nation from their hazardous influence.

"While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. And the Lord's anger burned against them.

The Lord said to Moses, "Take all the leaders of these people, kill them and expose them in broad daylight before the Lord, so that the Lord's fierce anger may turn away from Israel." So Moses said to Israel's judges, "Each of you must put to death those of your people who have yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor." Numbers 25:1-5

Worshipping these gods involved human sacrifice, ritual prostitution, self-mutilation and other acts, that even our permissive western society, would baulk at. Apart from taking the hearts of the people away from the One true God, Yahweh, there were serious consequences to the liberal sexual worship which seduced the Israelites. Sexually transmitted diseases are an obvious one, but there were traumatic consequences of this type of worship on people's self-esteem, emotions and peace of mind. So when you look at that aspect, it's clear why the Israelites stayed on their side of the border and carefully obeyed God's command to stay away! There was no room for tolerance. The people were commanded to obey Yahweh, no other, for their protection.

Now put yourself in Jonah's position. He is an Orthodox Jew, being asked to break that rule. He is called to go to the biggest economic centre in that part of the world, and help people he is forbidden to associate with. This goes against everything he believes and of course, he *"...ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord."* Jonah 1:3

Within that is one of the keys as to why the Lord was so incredibly patient with Jonah. The Lord knew that He was asking the impossible. He knew that when Jonah succeeded and went back to his people in Isra'el, he would be an outcast, not allowed to worship within the community and it was possible he would have been put to death by his own people. Thus Jonah says, *"Just kill me now, LORD! I'd rather be dead than alive..."*

Jonah risked losing his family, friends and everything he ever knew, to help a people he shouldn't help, knowing full well that God would do what Jonah personally believed that his God should never do. Enemies were to be destroyed, but God, oh that God who just couldn't help but be merciful! He had quite a history of it! Where would that leave Jonah? It was a hard road, but God needed Jonah to walk it. Who knows what the consequences of Ninevah's continual sin would have been, had God not stepped in? Plus to this day it teaches us to take on a greater worldview, outside our own narrow borders.

"Rescue others by snatching them from the flames of judgment. Show mercy to still others, but do so with great caution, hating the sins that contaminate their lives." Jude 1:23

Knowing more background makes me feel compassionate towards Jonah. He did make a massive sacrifice, no matter how much he limped, resisted and howled along the way. However, his attitude was still way off base, no matter what the cultural circumstances

were. We have a great God, *"who is able, through His mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think."* Ephesians 3:20

Would the Lord have taken care of Jonah? Yes, He would. God would never have asked Jonah to sacrifice all in the service of God, without the Lord having an amazing plan for him. However, we don't see Jonah pursuing that new plan with hope, and that is the most tragic part of the story.

"Now all glory to God, who is able to keep you from falling away and will bring you with great joy into his glorious presence without a single fault. All glory to him who alone is God, our Saviour through Jesus Christ our Lord. All glory, majesty, power, and authority are his before all time, and in the present, and beyond all time! Amen." Jude 1:24-25



A Christian Perspective on Mindfulness

Psychology goes through all kinds of phases, and over the last few decades, they have become more positive, and inclined towards steps you can take to improve your quality of life and heal. One techniques which is popular now, is mindfulness.

Mindfulness is intentionally, becoming completely aware of everything going on around you and inside you now, in this moment, without judgement and *"with openness, interest and receptiveness."* It may surprise some Christians to know that this is an "ancient practice found in a wide range of Eastern philosophies, including Buddhism, Taoism and Yoga."

That it's roots are not Christian doesn't bother me, as much as the manner in which I have seen mindfulness taught. As a chronic pain patient, I have been told many times that mindfulness is a wonderful method of improving pain management, so I bought a book on the topic. As a social worker, the book worried me, a lot.

Mindfulness is very effective in making people aware of what additional stresses can be adding to your pain. You know how you're feeling and may be able to pull all the pieces of the life puzzle together, rather than just reacting and feeling lost. The issue was, that was where that particular book stopped. It told me how to do tune in, and then left me in pain, depressed and totally miserable (at the time), with all this baggage and absolutely not a clue on what to do with it all.

If someone is overwhelmed or depressed, that is level of knowledge is potentially bad. Very bad. Mindfulness, without any additional steps to aid in coping with the volume of information, can lead to deeper feelings of hopelessness, failure, shame, guilt, rejection and can result in suicide.

So do we abandon mindfulness? I did. I chose to lean on the Lord for help, and the Psalms for comfort. David was very mindful. The Psalms are full of completely honest and aware reactions to his life, so he encourages me to let all my feelings, fears and hopes out before the Lord and deal with my circumstances in the same manner he did: prayer, praise, fasting and waiting on the Lord for deliverance.

My decision to abandon my book on mindfulness was a personal choice. It may have been that the book was simply a bad teaching of the practice, however, had I known that mindfulness came from eastern philosophy I would have never bought the book.

If you'd like a Christianised adaption of mindfulness, may I suggest a few ideas?

1. Don't go into any techniques without researching them and ensuring they are godly. You may be dabbling in a religious ritual without knowing it.
2. Make sure you have solid friends, a counsellor, pastor or family to talk to - in a hurry if needed - about the issues brought up. Without that, you're alone with your hurts. Don't let that happen. You're worth more than that.
3. Pray through everything. Hand it to the Lord and let Him be your buddy system.

4. If you use a mindfulness technique, cap it off with a session of praise to the Lord. That will encourage you and help balance any negativity by focussing on gratitude. It worked for David, it will surely work for us!

5. Use what gets brought to your attention as a means to repent, build your character up to the next level, then get closer to the Lord.

Nothing beats the healing, forgiving and loving power of the Lord. Remember that. Mindfulness may be a fad that comes and then goes... but the faithfulness of the Lord is eternal.

Notes:

*The last part of my definition and the philosophies where mindfulness are found, comes from The Happiness Trap <http://www.thehappinesstrap.com/mindfulness>



When Prayer Hurts

As prayer meets the challenges of life, it can sometimes become devastating and heart breaking. Praying for others brings us up against the obstacles that seem insurmountable in other's lives, spiritual, emotional and physical, with the added challenge of spiritual warfare included, and it isn't easy. There have been many times when I have felt like I have been forcefully hurled into the nearest brick wall, and every intercessor knows the familiar feeling of discouragement when you have worked so hard, believed God's Word to your best ability, and still the answers seem to always side step you, no matter what you do.

Paul wrote in Philippians 4:13 (Amplified Version) *"I have strength for all things in Christ who empowers me - I am ready for anything and equal to anything through Him who infuses inner strength into me [that is, I am self-sufficient in Christ's sufficiency.]"* I have heard this verse quoted many, many times, so often that I don't even stop to think about what this really means when I hear it. Jesus spoke of "abiding" in God, and He in us. We take it for granted that God is 'on tap' twenty-four hours a day, and if we speak in tongues, get used to this too. How little we see of how much God is working in us through His Holy Spirit. How little we see of His daily efforts to build us up, make us stronger, carry us through and guide our direction.

Our success in prayer is not as the world sees success, even though we unconsciously measure ourselves by the same standards. We think success is reaching the goal every time, and that goal has to be exactly how we perceived it! We want to be recognised for our contribution, we want to be the ones there to see the look of joy on the face of the person we prayed for when they are encouraged and strengthened, when their heart's desire reaches them. Don't we feel so robbed and cheated if this doesn't happen? But it doesn't belong to us, it belongs to God, and we are just servants. We have to let go. Being a servant of the Most High God is hard work. It takes a lot of effort, and often we see very little reward - but remember that is only now. As frustrating as it is, our reward is in heaven.

Luke 9:62 reminds us, *"And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."* Keep going forwards, hold onto your vision and keep praying with faith in the Father. He will never leave us with so little comfort and encouragement that we cannot go on, keep going, and keep looking ahead.



What Breaks Couples Up

All couples have issues they will always struggle with, but having conflicts doesn't mean there are problems or that they are on rocky ground destined to end in the divorce courts. It is the attitudes that matter. According to Dr John Gottman from "The Love Lab," the way a couple fights is a good predictor of whether they will stay together or split. If critical, defensive, withdrawing you have problems. If use humour, show affection for one another even in tense times and acknowledge the other's point of view, then can work through the tough times and remain a couple. Keeping a sweet spirit is the key: not blaming each other, looking out for each other's interests, honest but kind communication. Not retreating from issues, but working through them fairly. It is loss of love and connection, especially communication and the intimacy of sharing aspects of your life in a safe setting that breaks up most couples, not whether the cap is left off the toothpaste, or her constant obsession with keeping the house clean.

Other factors which lead to divorce are whirlwind romances where the courtship isn't long enough to last past the first euphoria, and life time decisions are made when passion is on a high. When the passion subsides with everyday life's demands, as it will, the relationship quickly fails. Great romances are hard to maintain, especially if there has never been a chance to come down to earth and deal with difficult and concrete problems before the vows are exchanged. Marital bliss based on an idealised view of a partner not fully known is not a solid base, and impossible to maintain. Romantic love can blossom into mature love, a steadfast love and caring if there is a basis of friendship and respect. Getting together because he is everything you have ever wanted, or because you have needs he/she seems to meet are not a secure bedrock on which to build a lifetime of shared companionship. Looking only at needs met can lead to selfishness, and when Mr Right proves to be Mr Normal, love can quickly die as the truth of who you really married becomes apparent in the clear light of day.

Build a partnership through trust, learning to balance needs for interdependence and dependence (own identity and don't become a doormat), and by learning to resolve conflicts and handle the changes that come along. (Crisis pulls you closer together rather than rips you apart.) Good choices made over a period of getting to know each other (which does not include living together, couples who live together then get married are more divorce prone than couples who haven't statistically) and knowing what you want and what you are prepared to give is essential when deciding who to marry. Need to know who you are, be confident in your own strengths and abilities, and know who your partner really is and what she/he really wants. In joining together you are also affected by your spouse's problems, and if you can barely handle your own, consider how well you will do with the additional load of concerns which will affect you both.

Love can change, grow and mature into something lasting and wonderful. It will never look like Hollywood, but the quality can be better than anything any Movie Producer ever imagined.



Turning Joy To Strength

I constantly hear complaints from people who receive a lot of joke e-mails in their in-box. I don't know if passing on jokes has become a substitute for real communication and that offends people, or if we have become so driven by work that we just don't have time to stop and chuckle anymore. I generally read these e-mails because I find a quick laugh lightens the load of my day.

The World Health Organisation has released statistics that indicate that by 2020 depression will be the most common illness in the world, and that serious episodes of depression will be the second largest cause of death and disability. Depression is not an affluent western disease. It affects all cultures and all social classes. It affects more than mental health, as it can be a trigger which causes many diseases, including heart disease. Heart disease is the leading cause of death in Australia and the United States.

According to the University of Maryland (U.S.A.), mental stress causes inflammatory reactions in the blood vessels which lead to fat and cholesterol build up. This has the potential to lead to heart attack if it remains untreated. A study by the University's Cardiologists found that "people with heart disease responded less humorously to everyday life situations." Thus, they were far more prone to stress, negativity and depression. (For the full article please visit <http://www.umm.edu/features/laughter.htm>) Their recommendation for good cardiac health, as well as eating right and exercise, is now to "try to find ways to take ourselves less seriously." One way to do this is to make it a habit to fit a good laugh or two into your day.

The International Stress Management Association in the United Kingdom calls laughter "*inner aerobics*." Laughing not only releases the hormones called endorphins which make you feel good, but it also improves blood circulation, stops headaches and stimulates the production of infection fighting T cells in the blood stream. Compare how you feel when you are stressed or unhappy, with how you feel when you laugh. It won't take you long to realise which one is better for you.

The motto of the British Laughter Clinic Project is *"If you are too busy to laugh, you are too busy!"* They quote Proverbs 17:22 *"A merry heart does good like a medicine, but a broken spirit dries up the bones."* For years in church I sung chorus' about the joy of the Lord being my strength without understanding the meaning. Now it seems modern medicine is finally recognising and utilising a principle that God created before time itself. Being joyful gives you a more positive outlook on life, and better health. No matter what you look like, a smile on your face suits you.

The Scriptures encourage us to focus on what is good, and pure and just. We're told to give thanks to God in all things, which is a way of adopting a positive outlook. There world can be a black, dismal place, but if you find something to be grateful for and smile about, it will seem much better!



The Ultimate Pursuit Of Happiness

I seem to be one of these people who never goes looking for trouble, but it always succeeds in finding me! I value the idea of a quiet life. I don't want to be a millionaire, I don't want to be popular, I don't even want to look like a supermodel. I'd just like to see the bills paid with a bit of extra put aside for emergencies, a car that doesn't keep breaking down, a decent family that doesn't use me for its own ends, a few valued close friends, and a positive job to occupy me. Now is that asking too much?

Simple as that may be by the standards of the nineties, it never seems to happen. Take for example last year. I live in a block of units with a communal car park. At 3am one morning, the car next to mine just decided to ignite and burn to the ground, the cause was an electrical fault in the motor. The lady who owned the car was overjoyed, she was planning on getting a new car, and had a wonderful insurance payment. As for me, my car was badly blistered down one side, my wheelchair hoist was partially melted, thus grounding me, and this sent was a disaster that sent me into total financial chaos. The insurance company, who I had paid into for 13 years without ever having made a claim, decided they wanted \$500 to fix it now, even though it wasn't my fault. On top of this my mother was on chemotherapy and ill, my cat had to be put down, my friends were so busy with their own lives I was lonely beyond endurance and God and I were not on the best of terms. Of course we weren't. He could have stopped that wretched thing from happening, and the rest of it! I guess it is an understatement and totally unnecessary to tell you that I wasn't happy...

Sociologists have decided to research what makes people happy, and who knows, if we can follow the equation of success, perhaps some of our social problems will disappear as well? So far the discovery has been made that in wealthy nations, money isn't really related to how happy you are. I understand that link. Money doesn't fix everything. My being able to get the car fixed that day would still not have made my mother well, brought the incurable cat back from the dead or sorted out my friends priorities in my favour, well, at least unless I had the kind of shallow acquaintances who could be easily bought. The studies also stated the obvious, in saying that you were happier if your marriage and family relationships were in good shape, and constantly unhappy if they weren't. No new headlines there. Then they went on to say the quality of your values, interests, health, and workplace all had a role to play, and if you felt like a meaningless little nothing at work, you had a better chance of getting cardiovascular disease and suffering from depression.

I finished reading this article and wondered why they had even bothered to write it. Don't we already know all this? They gave no answers as to how to make your spouse better quality, get your kids to stop getting into trouble, or how to get a better job with the perfect boss etc. The most they could say was and to improve the individual's confidence and morale, we need more effective support for family life. If there are people who can help us iron out our problems, then we will be happy. The sociologists were specifically speaking about government born services such as counselling, child minding etc., and again I had to wonder whether in reality, they really solved the problems at the heart of the matter, and that is generally the real problem: the individual's heart.

God is very cluey. When He made us, it wasn't by accident. We are not a product of evolution, our mental and physical structure didn't gradually evolve to produce what we are today. A wiser scientist has said that the chances of life evolving on earth in such complexity, are the same as the chances of a strong wind blowing through a junk yard and

assembling a flight worthy 747 aircraft. It is not only our bodies that science has never been able to fully understand and explain, but also our hearts. Only the Creator who holds the blueprints can tell us what is really wrong.

In Jeremiah He reveals to us a good part of the problem: *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind..."* verses 17:9-10a Again in Ephesians God talks again about our hearts being imperfect. *"...no longer walk as the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness... put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness."* Ephesians 4:17b-19 and 22-24

I was taught once that the wish and intent of the Gentiles, as referred to here, was to be happy, and from this you can see, happiness can be our worst enemy. Our natural desires, if left without correction, soon blow out of control and this is what causes the most irreparable harm. As Galatians 5:19-21 lists them, the long term results are sexual sins that break hearts and ruin lives, ending in disease, unwanted children and abuse. Also we see envy, murders, hatred, fights, unrestrained anger, jealousy, lying, drunkenness and addictions, and from these come all the social problems everyone is scared of and are trying to stop from happening. To do this, we are trying to find the ultimate way to find and harness happiness, but from what God's Word shows me, we are going to end up in a nasty cycle on this path. Pursuing happiness leads to greed etc. which creates further problems which we attempt to escape from by trying to find... you guessed it, happiness, the great solver of all problems, and around we go again.

It is not so much our happiness that matters to God, as our character and faith. With these two things built up, we will not only have qualities that are of an eternal value, but our lives will be so much easier in the long run. How much less trouble will we experience if we are made cleaner through the trials of life, and God does not allow the seeds of pride, greed, selfishness, fruitless ambition and anxiety to grow in us? When we look back with a clear mind, I am sure that one day we will thank God that He allowed us seasons of suffering so that we could be saved from the worse problems that breed in too longer times of ease and happiness, when we lose our need of God and our priorities revolve around what we want and the world's ways. When we battle and are unhappy, that is when we see the 'big picture' of life, that is when we search for truth. If we never have a need to search, then our hearts are like that of a spoiled child, totally selfish and ruined.

There is only One in who we can find true happiness which will not send us on a path to self destruction, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ. He has said that if we seek Him, *"For I will turn their mourning to joy, will comfort them, and make them rejoice rather than sorrow...and My people shall be satisfied with My goodness, says the Lord."* Jeremiah 31:13b-14 The best, and only balanced way can only be found in Him.



The Perfect Woman

"Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is above rubies She seeks wool and flax, and willingly works with her hands She also rises while it is yet night, and provides food for her household. She considers a field and buys it; from her profits she plants a vineyard She perceives that her merchandise is good, and her lamp does not go out by night. She extends her hands to the poor. For all her household is clothed with scarlet. She makes tapestry for herself. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness. She watches over the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also and he praises her."
Proverbs 31

Anyone who has read this proverb, or heard it preached may have felt intimidated! Either you feel exhausted just reading about her, or you can rationalise how inadequate she makes us feel by firmly declaring that this is way out of date. No one commonly buys fields and then plants vineyards anymore Do they? Whichever way you look at it she is still a pretty awesome woman. Organised, prepared, not lazy, independent, money smart and with perfect compassionate and loving character. She works hard, has a happy family, a nice home, some financial security in assets behind her. She is lovingly adored and respected, not a down-trodden, harassed, brow beaten housewife. She doesn't sound at all like us either! To be like her would be to achieve perfection, and that is the kind of perfect I wouldn't mind being, (though some more sleep would be appreciated in the schedule.) But living up to her standard is impossible, and even though we know that realistically, don't we still try and achieve the same impossibility in our own terms?

We may not have the same job description, but we still place a lot of pressure on ourselves to perform as perfect wives, mothers, workers, interior decorators, housekeepers, cooks, daughters, sisters etc. etc. etc These days we are still busy women, working early morning to late at night to be perfect and do everything. We're locked into an unrealistic trap of being too busy, above and beyond what the Proverbs 31 women represents. Everything is rushed. There is no time for ourselves and even less time for others. We are too stressed and burdened even to take time for the little everyday essentials like kindness, patience, compassion for others and courtesy. Road rage is a good example of the problem, and it is said that more women commit acts of road rage than men.

High flying entrepreneurs are often said to be workaholics. Maybe, looking at our regular lifestyles, we need to rethink the profile of who we apply the label of a workaholic to. Many everyday people, wives, mothers and singles too, are overcommitted and/or fit the profile of a classic workaholic. They can't stop being busy and super organised, and are still at it, even on a holiday. Sleep is reduced to a minimum, they don't relax or "play," and if they do, they work hard at getting it right! They are always problem solving, tired, irritable and easily become socially isolated. Then on top are the physical symptoms of a body under too much stress: headache, stomach complaints, insomnia, muscle tension and their heart is racing. They are driven to achieve, and they don't know how to get off the merry-go-round. Believe me; they are not enjoying this lifestyle, not a single minute of it! It really is a rat race.

You can be a hard worker rather than a workaholic. The difference is, do you know how to stop, and can you actually do it? Do you eat right? Do you get enough sleep? Do you rest and take breaks? If you do these things, you are probably alright. Workaholics believe all

the responsibility rests on their shoulders. They can't delegate. They would rather do it all themselves rather than have it not done properly, and then have to redo it again to their standard later. That kind of thinking is obsessive. It illustrates a strong element of needing to be in control of every aspect of their lives to feel safe, as well as their unrelenting drive to achieve perfection every time.

Linda Naiman, a life coach says, *"Being addicted to busyness is a product of low self esteem."* We can be too busy as we are trying to make up for what we see within ourselves as failures, or fatal shortcomings. We are trying to prove our worth as human beings constantly. Busyness can also be a means to suppress the pain, frustration, guilt and fear we have locked away inside of us. It is an addiction, and like every other addiction, is a way to push down these feelings and cope with life, trying to function free of them. Like alcohol, drugs or eating, it doesn't work. We only become more harmed in the process, and often we damage the relationships we are striving so hard to keep. No addiction or its causes can be pushed under the carpet. If you can see from reading this that you have a problem, please seek help in solving it, and if frustrated, keep seeking help until you get what you need.

If you feel you are bordering on workaholicism, or are just too busy and overcommitted and want that to change, here are some simple suggestions for regaining control of your situation.

- Work at being patient with yourself and other people. Be realistic in your assessment of what can and can't be done and how quickly, and try not to expect instant miracles.
- Find the source of your anxiety or feelings of inferiority that are pushing you towards trying to be too perfect, and seek help and healing. Once the root of the problem is eliminated, the drive will disappear too.
- Work on building better relationships with others which have a balance of give and take. Make time to talk, be together and enjoy activities which you have in common. People want connection and communication more than they want a perfect person who does everything for them.
- Try and build a support network of others that will help you, eg. getting kids to activities. Be prepared to reciprocate within reason.
- Determine what tasks you can and can't reasonably do and say no to the overload. Set known, clear boundaries so you aren't bombarded by other's expectations. Saying no when you are overloaded does NOT make you a bad person.
- Negotiate household tasks with other members of the family. Don't do everything, and if it isn't done perfectly, learn the grace to cheerfully appreciate the other's contribution. Don't undermine their efforts by "fixing" it; they won't help again if you do this.
- Take care of your body with adequate nutrition, sleep, health care and exercise. Don't forget to let your mind rest and learn something new every so often to stay fresh mentally.
- Write down your stresses and hurts in a journal and get them out of your system. Don't hold it in!
- Consider writing down the good things that happen, and what you are grateful for as well.

- Take some time out for yourself, even if it is only 15 minutes a day that you can manage.
- Make time as a family to "play" and have fun together.
- Keep your day balanced rather than overloading it with one activity and then feeling like you're "behind."
- Don't ever give up on your dreams and goals. You may feel like they take forever, but it's worth the wait!

It is not easy to be balanced and get everything done that does need doing, but we can resist the temptation to be constantly rushing and unhappy. We all struggle with our sense of worth, but God will help us as we need Him, and our value to Him is unlimited - no matter how perfect or imperfect we think we are. As the lyrics of one of my favourite worship songs express, *"Nothing I can say will take Your love away. No place I can go where Your love won't be there. Nothing I can do will make You love me more. Your love comes as a gift, and I only have to open it."*



The Missing Piece: Community

When I read about Jesus, I see a radical man who often acted in manner which offended people, and whose actions were profoundly distinctive and different from the status quo. I do not read of Him hesitating or coming into line with what public niceties expected of Him. He saw a need, and He fulfilled it without caring who would be shocked and what accusations would be brought against Him. His love for the people was greater. Recently I was saddened at an example of the church being held captive by the way the world thinks. A pastor when driving home at eleven at night, saw a very drunk girl weaving her way down the footpath on the highway. His instincts were to help her, but he was unable. Had he tried to get the girl into his car to take her to safety, being alone his actions could have easily been misconstrued and he would be falsely accused if not fined for rape or abduction. His reputation and the reputation and well being of the church was at stake. Where have we come to?

We've learnt to think like the world, rather than be transformed by the renewing of our minds. *In common terms, we're true "westerners." Even the white, English speaking masses, like the Asian and African cultures, have been continually persuaded and brainwashed by mass media, materialism and greed into being more "westernised." Our self value has been stripped away as our base in Christian values and belief and the sanctity of love, and family life have been all but demolished by Hollywood images and promises, the realities of work, mortgages and the relentless pursuit of happiness. The church's thought, also bombarded by these influences, has also become tainted and warped away from the original truths it was to live from. We are no longer aliens in a land that is not home, **with a different culture and separate standards, we easily fall into the world's trap, and live with all the expectations, demands and trappings.

We're programmed to "us." We fulfil our own need for significance and meaningful achievement, leaving the lost, the lonely, and less lovely outside our clique of friends and colleagues as we strive to attain our own goals and needs. How often do we ring up that person who was crying during the service, or who we know is having a hard time? Then, we must have time for us, so instead of attending a prayer meeting or home group, we "veg out" in front of the television, and lose contact with others, and even our families. *"At home, family members are in their own "Techno-Cocoons," each hooked up to a different techno-gadget."* The authors urge families to *"avoid this isolating trend of the nineties, and healthy communication alive."* *** Where have we gone?

The essential element missing from our churches, and in many instances from our Australian culture, is a sense of community. If you've studied sociology, "community" is a hackneyed phrase. Many texts have been written. extensive analysis and debate has taken place on it's existence, attributes and how to improve it. In our Judeo-Christian culture, there is a very simple ingredient that creates and holds together a community, that being love, an ability to look outside of ourselves to take time and be concerned for others. It is that Scriptural agape love which has no thought to cost or returns.

Brothers and sisters in Christ cannot hug as it may be misinterpreted, or lead to sin. Leaders stay remote from those they're leading so the truths of their imperfections and frailties aren't revealed. We chase revelation, prophecy, healing, deliverance, revival and church growth relentlessly - because we've got the answers the unsaved haven't got, so we're better than them, aren't we? Are we? Do you bring a newborn into a family with little sense of community and love, and then expect them to grow up completely whole, perfect

and healthy? What about when the baby Christians grow up so more, are able to stand up by themselves on more solid footing? Do you stop hugging, feeding, nurturing and spending time with your kids when they get a bit older, because they are now more able to cope by themselves? I think not.

So what is the answer? We can't make love and community happen. We can't put people through a six week programme and change their thinking. It's only God's work in our hearts that can birth true agape love, and a fulfilling lasting sense of true community. Come Lord Jesus, work in us.

Notes:

* "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is good and acceptable and perfect will of God." Romans 12:2

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with what is good." Romans 12:21

** "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ." Philippians 3:20 NKJV

*** From "Technostress" by Michelle Weil and Larry Rosen. Where have we gone?



Survivor

One of the top rating shows on Australian television was "Survivor." A group of twenty-somethings are stranded on a tropical island with a camera crew, and have to survive without power, running water or any technology or appliances. The second series was filmed in the Australian Outback, which is the desert region in central Australia. Hot, desolate, and unforgiving, there is very little water, and no recognisable food source other than insects and plant species.

Not many of us have been stranded on an island or in the desert, but we have all been stranded and trapped within distressing circumstances, having to find a way to survive as unscarred as possible, day by day indefinitely. Most of us have been through some form of abuse, relationship breakdown or bereavement. We can also suffer stress, depression, and heartache all of which can be as harsh and unrelenting as having to scrounge for food and water in a hostile climate! Living on the edge, or faced with an overwhelming trauma can make you or break you. You come out knowing far more about yourself, both strengths and weaknesses, and the true value and strengths of your relationships with those around you.

The difference between who survives and who doesn't comes down to whether or not you have hope, faith and a dream for the future. You need to have the ability to call on a source of strength, and be able to look forward, and be willing to put in the necessary effort to get through what lies before you. It is a decision. You have to want to work towards the best possible outcome. A survivor is just an ordinary human being who has courage and determination, and who can call on their own and God's strength to overcome the obstacles in their lives. A survivor is not some kind of superhero or uniquely gifted star. Everyone can do it.

So how do you actually pull through when the future seems bleak, and your hopes logically look impossible? People who have been in concentration camps, survived wrecks and natural disasters, have also been asked the same question. How do you survive a horrific situation you have no way of getting out of? The most common answer was looking forward to being reunited with loved ones. The greatest human need we have is for meaningful connection with others, and memories of past times of hope and joy, pull people through. These survivors looked ahead, and when there was a goal and some reason to live, they survived when others didn't. Many prayed and called upon God's help. Others had an innate ability to call upon their own inner reserve of strength. The ability to adapt and make the most of their current conditions was another major factor in who survived, as well as knowing when to take action and stand up for yourself, and when to remain passive. There is no use wasting your strength on a battle which will hurt you more, or put you at a greater disadvantage.

Survivors are also inspired by the achievements and positive qualities they seen in other's lives. They don't need to become a clone and copy that person, but they can see value, and are encouraged. A survivor will work out if there are better alternatives, try something new, look for answers, and talk to people rather than struggle in isolation. They will do their best to find solutions rather than letting hopelessness and more obstacles wear them down. They don't give up easily. A survivor will look fear in the face and recognise it for what it is worth. Fear is not an excuse, and they are not prone to blaming others for every unpleasant situation.

These traits help determine whether or not you will survive or be defeated. Without the conviction that there is a reason to live, and the available strength to make it, you won't survive long. Without hope and the determination to reach your goals and realise your dreams, your strength will fade. Hold onto your dreams for what you want your life to be, regardless of how it is now. It may take a long time to heal or be free of the abuse, pain or grief you are feeling, but if you can enlist the support of others and summon the courage to take one step at a time towards freedom and peace, you can and will make it one day!



So Much To Do, So Little Time

Many people have a great problem managing time. These days it rarely seems a case of laziness, rather too much to be done, too many demands and too little time. "Techno stress" and "information fatigue syndrome" are becoming the prognosis for some of the tensions of the nineties. Top authorities on the "psychology of technology," Michelle Weil, and Larry Rosen, believe that, "in the past decade we have seen technology invade our home, our cars, our movie theatres, our grocery stores, our jobs, literally every place in our lives. Every innovation - from cell phones to e-mail, from faxes to websites - demands new skills, speedier reaction times, creativity on call 24 hours a day. Technology keeps coming at us and we are told that we must adapt or fall behind." This is an incredible amount of pressure to be carried by anyone.

I once heard someone preach a harrowing sermon on how God would make you account for every second wasted in your life, every moment you could have been doing something more productive. It scared me at the time, but later as my mind came back onto an even keel, I began to wonder if a giving God who gave us forests and oceans to play in would be that harsh? Psalms talks of an instance with Israel in which God, being full of compassion, *"...remembered that they were but flesh, a breath that passes away and does not come again."* Psalm 78:39 He did not execute judgement on His wayward people automatically, even though they were not perfect enough in comparison with Him.

Apart from the time we spend with our loving God and preaching the gospel, does every second have impending judgement hanging over it? Ecclesiastes 3:12-13 presents as a purpose for life, *"I know there is nothing better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labour - it is the gift of God... (vs 17) ...for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work."* God has designated that our time should be divided between work and play, there is a balance. We quite often unwisely take on more than we should, trying to balance our own expectations of ourselves with demands from others, then also stuffing in what we perceive God expects of us. In doing this, we overload easily, losing the ability to be still and wait in a world where activity runs overtime.

In Isaiah there is a clear message regarding striving and salvation. *"For thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, 'In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength.' "* Isaiah 30:15 *"Woe to those who go down to Egypt (the world) for help, and rely on horses (worldly strength), who trust in chariots because they are many (like technology has proliferated), and in horsemen because they are very strong (other people), but who do not look to the Holy One of Israel, nor seek the Lord!"* *Isaiah 31:1 Science tells us that it is when we are at rest that our bodies grow. Our spirits work on the same principle. Back in chapter thirty, Isaiah tells us the answer to determining what we should and shouldn't be doing come from God, He will lead us in the path He has planned for our lives if we look to Him for help and seek Him. *"Your ears shall hear a word behind you saying, 'This is the way, walk in it,' whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left."* Isaiah 30:21

There is comfort in the words, *"Have you not known? have you not heard? The everlasting God, the Lord, the creator of the ends of the earth, neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength."* Isaiah 40:28-29 Why not trust your calendar and

expectations to the One who runs the universe? If anyone should know what they are doing and what is best for His creation, it is surely Him.



Single Minded

*"Just give me single minded love,
Lord I give you all of me,
'Cause I don't want to worry anymore,
About the one that I might meet.
Lord I know You have a plan,
Though at times its hard to see.
Just give me single minded love,
Lord I give You all of me."
Kenny Marks*

I loved being single. I did get lonely, but generally, I like being on my own. It hasn't always been that way though. Ever since the cradle it seems I have had this preoccupation, this drive that imprinted on me the message that I needed a man. Maybe it is cultural, maybe it has always subconsciously been a way of filling my unmet needs for unconditional love, acceptance and security. Once I became a Christian it took a back seat and became less pressing, but it still remained, and would rear its head and make me feel like a failure. Finally, I saw the truth about what I was doing, and God healed my co-dependence. I began to see He had given me work to complete, gifts and people around me which were maybe more fulfilling than a relationship would have been. At that stage I still needed to grow in many areas. Any choices I made about relationships ended up in my getting more hurt. It was better for me to be "alone."

I have never been totally "boy crazy" like the girls at school, but still, dealing with singleness has been a huge issue for me. I wanted to be married by the time I was twenty-five, and that didn't happen. I didn't enter my first long term relationship until I was thirty-one. I remember being exceptionally depressed on my twenty-fifth birthday. I was part way to my goals. Living by myself, had a car, my independence, but work was not what I wanted it to be. I hadn't started writing and using my gifts by this stage, and life was totally empty. I know I am not the only one who has felt that way. On doing an internet search about singleness, all I could find was thousands of links to dating services and chat rooms. The only places where there were positive articles on being single, and still leading a fulfilling life were on Christian ministry sites. That spoke volumes to me. In a society where we have many single parents through relationship breakdowns, still people were relentlessly pursuing the ultimate match, feeling empty and like social misfits without it. I know Christians have the same views quite often, but isn't it comforting to know that God accepts us as complete individuals in Him. We are never written off by our Heavenly Father because we don't have something the world tells us is so necessary.

I know I am not alone in my experience. In her column on Crosswalk.com, Lori Smith quotes a comment she received from a reader about singleness. *"I struggled for 20 years with being single. I wanted God's will, but I wanted so desperately to get married. I could not understand why God would not give me a husband if He loved me."* Another anonymous quote on a secular web site made a good point from another angle, *"It is tremendous freedom not to ride the love/sex roller coaster - I have very serious career goals that takes a lot of energy, concentration and time. The last thing I want to do is spend my spare time listening to some half-wit in a bar rambling on..."* Being single can bring an enjoyable freedom to experience life, make the best use of your time to develop your hobbies and talents, and to put the energy into learning solid, reliable relationship skills in your interaction with friends and family. Though the challenge is to enjoy that

season of your life without considering it stage one for the all important next act: marriage. Like any area of life, how content you are is going to depend on your focus. If you make the most of what you've got and live in a balance, then you may find the hunger to become joined exclusively to another person will diminish, as your enjoyment in other areas of your life grows.

There are still many social expectations of getting married. I have been asked many times by friends I haven't seen for a long time, what my current marital status is, and sometimes meeting other people's downcast looks and being confronted with "Oh well never mind, one day it will happen," can be undermining and depressing. However, if we know that God has a plan for our lives, and that He brings things along in perfect timing, we can look forward to our life getting better and better, single or not. Married couples can have many more problems to face than a single person. It is not necessarily the better lifestyle, just a different one. Crosswalk. com and the 700 Club both had several articles on being single and content that I would recommend reading. Here is an abbreviated version on strategies they suggested to survive as a happy single.

- Let God worry about your future. He promises that it will be good. (Jeremiah 29:11) In the gospels you can also read about the gifts He has given us, and the promises that we all have a role to play in life, and we have everything we need in Him.
- Learn to value yourself as a unique individual. Take the time to discover more about you, try new things, meet new people, and develop to be the best you can be for you.
- Concentrate on building a strong relationship with God. Even the Apostle Paul said it is easier to be single, as you can focus on God, where as the married person focuses on their partner instead. He is the ultimate husband (Isaiah 54) and will always be more able and more available to meet our needs and listen to us than any partner: twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week! Man disappoints us, but God is always faithful.
- Bless others with your time and talents. Try some voluntary work, or get involved in church or community activities. Focussing on finding the right partner rather than making the most of your time and life, no matter what your circumstances, can lead to becoming very selfish and insular.
- Obsessively looking at your own needs robs you, and robs others.
- Enjoy being your own boss! It's great to be able to eat when you want, wear what you want, go where you want and be who you want, in your own space.

Being single can be a great blessing. I do still enjoy time to myself and I know, if ever I marry, I will miss the luxuries of being on my own. Being single can be tough, but ask any married person, and they will tell you it is far from easy at times. Learn to be content with what you have got. There are so many opportunities and advantages we have in western society. Make the most of it with a positive attitude. Life is going to be what you make it, and married or single, it is worth it!



Shortcomings

I've had some really bad experiences in churches. After some, I've become very cynical, and it's taken a lot to learn to trust pastors and my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ again. God made me stop and think recently. I was talking to someone about a local church I am not overly impressed with, and they, while admitting that the church being discussed wasn't perfect, gave a positive, encouraging response about it which countered my negativity.

I was taken aback. The response held such a strong contrast to my frustration. I marvelled at the grace this Christian was able to show. They were not naïve or ignorant of the real situation, but they did not sink into judgement the way I had. They responded with grace in such a way, I came home and looked up the definition of grace to learn more about it. It is obviously something I need to work on

I have used the term 'graceful,' to describe people myself, but often in a feminine sense, rather than a spiritual one. It is one of those words you hear, but don't necessarily understand the meaning and function of. Surprisingly, the answer as to what makes you graceful is very simple. Grace is love, kindness and goodwill. It is an attitude of love that is the opposite of hurt, anger and frustration, and is described beautifully in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 *"Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. Love does not demand its own way. Love is not irritable, and it keeps no record of when it has been wronged. It is never glad about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance."*

We're told as Christians to love one another (1 John 4:7-8 *"Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is born of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God for God is love."*) If we can do that in imitation of God, we'll be more patient with each other's faults, weaknesses and failures. Love does cover a multitude of sins, and can get us through the bumps we experience as we rub each other up the wrong way in a church where we are all supposed to be behaving as if we are perfect.

My prayer is that I will be less proud, less self-protective around others, and that the Lord will soften my heart so that I don't further compound the problems I see by my own actions. I want to be a blessing, not a curse to someone else. May God teach us all to be as patient with each other as He is with us. If we are, then church and other Christians will be much less stressful, and that has got to be a good thing.



To Be Or Not To Be? Regaining Broken Trust

"If you can not have trust then there is no relationship. Take it from me. I was married for over five years. I found out he had a lot of girls coming on to him and he would blow them off for the longest time. Then I found a number in his wallet. I called and a woman answered it, she was hoping that I was my hubby. To make a long story short...I met her and she told me that he had finally accepted her proposal after two weeks on the job site. Well I asked him and of course he denied it. Then he came home to her in the house talking to me. He passed out cold!!! The next year he wouldn't talk to her or see her and/or anything to do with her. But then I became paranoid. I couldn't let him go anywhere without having him followed or leaving him alone at the house without having the line tapped. So I fell apart. I needed that trust that he stole from me. Now we are friends, and he sees his daughter, but I am a divorced single mother, now, you can take it for what its worth or you can let it kill you." Signed Anonymous

I came across this posting on a message board. It was answering a cry for help from a young woman whose husband was using pornography. It highlights the whole issue of trust in relationships. It is one that has been a challenge for all of us, in some way or other. How do you restore trust when it's lost? Can you restore it? Is it worth restoring, or will there always be an unfillable void in the relationship that has an awesome potential for its destruction? If your loved one betrays you, whether that be a child, parent, sibling or friend, how do you know it is the first time - or is it the first time you have found out? Have they broken your trust repeatedly in the past? Are you an idiot because you didn't see the signs? Will they do it again in the future? Can you trust anything they do? How do you know what they are thinking?

What a minefield of problems any kind of betrayal opens up! I went to our library and searched through books on relationships to try and find out how you rebuild shattered relationships. I found references on how trust is lost in early childhood on, but nothing on rebuilding it. On the surface level, regaining trust seems like a lost cause. Psychologist, Robert Kastenbaum, has said that trust was whether or not what is said by a person is reliable and matches their actual attitudes and behaviour. Adam Sieler (journalist) defined trusting someone as an assessment of their sincerity, reliability and competence. He goes on to state the blatantly obvious. By your actions you gain trust, and by your actions you lose it. It makes or breaks relationships. So much for the guiding wisdom of those who are supposed to be the experts.

So where does that leave us when we don't know where to turn to for help? A philosophy book said that you don't have to trust someone totally. They don't have to have an excellent degree of integrity, you get by with some wins and some losses. Sometimes they are going to pull a dirty trick on you, but to keep going, you accept it or the relationship dies off. Is that what we want to settle for? Another answer of the message board stated, "I think you will always feel distrustful of him because you will always wonder if he will act out / carry out whatever fantasies or delights he may be getting from porno. So no, I don't think you will trust him, because it will always be in the back of your mind."

Kastenbaum takes us back to the subject of marriage. He says that trust contributes to the love felt by marriage partners. The greater the trust, the greater the love, and thus the greater the intimacy in the marriage. Partners are able to work out how their partner really feels about things, and where their thought patterns genuinely lie. Ultimately God is the only One we can trust when our world caves in, and those closest to us disappoint us.

People will always be a source of hurt, intentionally and unintentionally. As King David did, you will find comfort and healing in the One who will never forsake you or betray you for any reason.

"Then David spoke to the Lord the words of this song, on the day when the Lord had delivered him from the hand of his enemies, and from the hand of Saul [who wanted to kill him.] And he said, "God is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; the God of my strength in whom I will trust; my shield and the horn on my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge; my Saviour, You save me from violence. I will call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised; so shall I be saved from my enemies... In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried out to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, and my cry entered His ears." 2 Samuel 22:1-4,7



Simple!

It's too easy to have a simplistic view on the answers to life's problems. In the words of M. Scott Peck, "*life is difficult*," and it is certainly, complex.

Faith is a paradox. We're told in the Scriptures to have a child-like faith, and so we should. But there are many times when a child-like faith seems to be too hard, and at times, inappropriate. In certain areas of our lives, it is almost an effortless task to believe in a loving, providing Father, who can pull answers out of a "hat" as effortlessly as a magician produces a rabbit. However, when it comes to the deeper, more traumatic issues of life, faith and God's replies to our problems can become extremely complicated.

Perhaps the problem is our point of view. We don't see things God's way, or from His 'height.' He knows the future, His plan, what's happening in Heaven on our behalf, and He has a crystal clear view on what's wrong and right. It's easier to get where you're going when you can see a clear road map. When the way ahead is shrouded in mystery and uncertainty, faith becomes arduous, and can leave you feeling like a lost child.

I'm sure God has a response to every prayer which He makes the moment it is uttered - but ninety-nine percent of the time, we don't hear what He says. We don't have all the answers, and as we seen in Job, we're not supposed to. Often, we probably wouldn't be able to comprehend the sophisticated concepts of the 'great scheme of things.' Also, if we knew the plan, we most probably wouldn't learn the lesson, gain the courage, or obtain the reward at the other end.

Faith comes in levels of achievement, which we build on over time. It is a different scenario between trusting God to provide the money to pay for your bills, than it is to trust Him to rescue you from terminal cancer. There are many testimonies to God's provision in both cases, and for some people, it may be easier to believe in healing from cancer than provision for the phone bill. When our backs are against the wall, simplistic faith, and a simplistic view on how God deals with our pain, can be irritating and far from helpful. At times like these, we need to find our own feet with our faith. You can't live your Christian walk through someone's else's faith or revelations, though they can help as testimonies. In crisis, we function on the basis of our own experience with God, our own understanding of His love and caring. We need to individually hear God's voice in our hearts, giving us His direction for that specific situation. We need to walk with our hand in His, not someone else's.

When God's promises are freely flowing, but the stress is building and the answer seems a long time in coming, what do you do? Here's the simplistic answer: sit it out, be honest with God in your prayers, keep praying, hoping and wait. Trust me, I know it's the hardest thing in the world to do.



What is Real Love?

"Love that is chosen freely is an unbreakable tie."

The family climate I grew up in was one of control, demands and manipulation. I was loved if I did the right thing. Condemned, accused of selfishness and screamed at if I did the wrong thing. I had no social skills, and was a very quiet, wounded child. Thankfully, in my early teens I came to know the love of God. I became involved in a wonderful church youth group, and God started to heal and change me. It took many years before I was able to form healthy relationships, and I still have to work hard at it. I have so many false impressions of what love is in my head, its hard to know what is genuine, and how to act the right way.

God spoke to me one day when I was very depressed about my family, and gently showed me that what I had experienced wasn't His definition of love. I was shocked. What I had received as love was normal for our family. They were convinced it was real love. But when I put it in context of what God teaches love is in the Bible, it fell short. It was based on unmet needs, fear, control, insecurity, and misconceptions of what love really is. It looked like love, but underneath, was shallow and could not survive the pressures placed on it. It was based on self, not any value I had as a human being.

These days we see many relationships, marriages and families fall apart. Initially they were based on love, so we think, so why do they fail? Communication? Money pressures? Or could part of it be a societal misunderstanding of what love really is? Do people enter relationships to get needs met or feel secure and connected? Do they have a genuine interest in their partner for them not what they can get out of them? Is crying out for love so strong, that any promise of connection and that love hunger being met will propel them into commitment, rather than objectively looking at what kind of person is and isn't compatible and healthy? Is there real respect and admiration? Is there a solid base of friendship, common ideals and worldview?

If not based on respect, honour, admiration, affection, friendship and compatibility any relationship will fail. If we go into relationships focussed on what we want, when our needs are not met we will cry foul, and hurt each other. In this situation, often people resort to manipulation and control to try and forcefully get their needs met out of desperation, or destroy their partner by words and actions in revenge. An affair may start to see if the needs can better be met elsewhere. This is not the way of love, not only in Christianity, but every philosophy.

Love is willing to work hard because they see the other person as worth the investment. Needs are recognised. It isn't about sex, companionship, money, social status or just fitting in with the picture of what a family / relationship should be, it is much deeper. The reasons for being there are greater. There is a bond which holds two people together that isn't built on dysfunctionality. When that kind of love is present, you can push through the challenges and problems, and at times they will seem insurmountably tough! Love, at the end of the day, can still look at the other with respect, and a desire to see good come their way.

Hollywood and television does not teach us this kind of love. Some therapists don't teach us this, especially ones who deal with abusive families and advocate getting out of relationships as soon as signs of trouble come up. They see so much of the bad, many have not learnt how to foster the good and make it grow and get better. Their belief in the

capacity of people to heal and improve is limited. So where do we learn to do this? The best guide I have found is in the way God teaches us to act towards each other. Without His clear direction, I would be confused by all the images and examples I see. The conflicting self help books, the various words of advice about which way works. I know my mind needs re-programming out of the garbage I have learnt which clearly only wounds.

My list of the attributes of love includes these. True love is not conceited, full of hatred, contentious, jealous, ambitious, angry, envious, proud, bitter or self seeking. It is forgiving, merciful, giving, generous, sharing, joyful when others are blessed, peace seeking, truthful, encouraging, and it brings freedom and release. Naturally it is also faithful, kind, humble, and does not tolerate lying. It is genuine, rather than hypocritical, compassionate, shares joy and grief and is hopeful. It shows fairness, is never judgemental or quick to blame. Neither is it offensive, easily provoked to anger or vengeful. It builds up the weak, endures all things, shows self control, and is tender hearted.

All these attributes create safety, peace, security, confidence and healing. They unify people, not divide, and they bring great strength. What a world we would have if these attributes were the goals we were all striving to achieve in our relationships. Of course, in trying to do all this, our human tendencies break through and cause us to fail, but God is merciful, and He gives us the strength and power to reach towards this ideal when we don't have the ability. We can only achieve love and peace in our homes in fellowship with Him.

As for my family, I pray God will bless them. Some days I do so with a heart heavy with grief, and still deal with the damage and memories that are painful. I pray God will bless them as He has me, by setting them free in His love to be the best they can be.



Let Me Be Free To Be Me

"I don't know how many times I've held back my feelings, and stuff I just knew I couldn't tell him because it wasn't what I was allowed to think or do. I wasn't supposed to be me; I was supposed to be a perfectly behaved princess that did what was expected. I guess I was scared I'd lose him, but it happened anyway. Maybe deep down he knew I was lying by being what he dictated. Maybe he picked up my insecurity, I was always scared I'd do the wrong thing and it would all end and I'd be on my own again with nothing. He sure was the boss of that relationship, no matter how sweet or how many times he told me he believed in me." Maree 26

Have you ever succumbed to the pressure of someone else's expectations in a relationship? Do you feel you have equality in the power balance (decision making and task sharing) and that your needs are equally being met? Some people prefer a partner with a stronger temperament; they can co-exist happily while someone else calls the shots for both. Yet others fall in love with a decisive partner thinking that they will be taken care of free of the pressures of life's responsibilities, and then later come to see the same traits as control and manipulation as they find they are not allowed to take the reins, or truly be themselves.

In relationships we are taught to compromise, and the pressure can certainly be there to do so. The problem is, compromise is often a win-lose situation. One partner gets more than the other, who then has to give up on the fulfilment of their need or desire. The alternative is to learn to co-operate, so there is an opportunity to work together as a team in order that both parties can win, at least in a manner which won't be dominated by the stronger partner. This however, is wonderful in theory, but so hard to put into practice! Unless both parties are mature enough to be unselfish, and can work together without feeling choked by emotion and any other unresolved situations, you are, in reality, back to compromise and unmet needs.

What everyone needs is unconditional love, acceptance and a partner that values you for your uniqueness and individual value: just exactly as you are without wanting to change you. It's when we are not given the space to utilise our own potential, think and feel freely without condemnation, or to be ourselves with our own goals and values, that we feel like we are being stuffed in a box and suffocated. Couples that live together successfully have both common goals and a common identity, but within that, their own individual goals and identity which are not denied by the other. Studies have found that couples who are secure enough in themselves to allow the other partner that freedom, have an equal balance of power and met needs and thus, long and successful marriages.

As I've already said, it comes with chronological maturity, life experience, and is not easy, but it's not impossible either. Life and relationships are processes. They are continual and alive; they change with circumstances and can get better, even though at times you may feel its going in quite the opposite direction. However, no matter what age you are, or how long you have been in a relationship, from any stage you can work towards equality in partnerships. One suggestion is that you do not rely heavily on your partner to have all your needs met. Have a balance that wisely includes giving and receiving support from trusted family and friends. Total dependence on a partner emotionally or physically puts incredible stress on them. They are being expected to be responsible for two lives, when it is difficult enough to live one! If the needs of children are added to that expectation, it can become an impossible, back-breaking task to bear.

The researchers that study human development have also noted that to be in an equal partnership you need to be able to stand on your own two feet as a separate identity. It is only when we know our own strengths and weaknesses, our identity, what we believe and where we want to grow and develop, that we can share with another without leaning on them. Security in our own value and ability removes many fears and insecurities from relationships that become toxic over time. When you hold hands with someone, you are supporting the weight of your own body; you don't transfer your weight onto the other person. You stand separate, yet together, and this is ideally the best way to maintain a relationship: separate, yet together, and able to freely relate and co-operate without threat of losing yourself to others' expectations.

Even with a loving, equally balanced partner who allows us to be ourselves, and is there to support us when we need the help, life can still be tough. We need to know we have a God who is able to assist us as a couple and individually. He is there to listen twenty-four hours a day to any fear, hurt or problem: and He does it without judgement. He is there to love us and give us His power and courage whenever we find we could use some help: and He does that with unconditional love and acceptance. He knows us more intimately than any lover, He is able to provide for all our needs, and He is the only One who has the wisdom to get us through tricky and painful situations. People will always let us down and hurt us, no matter how much they love and understand us or how close they are, but God will never leave us alone or leave our needs unmet if we take the time to ask Him and wait with open hearts for His assistance.



The Perfect Partner

"Of all the misconceptions about love, the most powerful and pervasive is the belief that 'falling in love' is love. But it does lead us to make commitments from which real love is may begin, and gives us a foretaste of the more lasting mystical ecstasy that can be ours after a lifetime of love." M Scott Peck, The Road Less Travelled

There are dozens of reasons why people want a life partner, whether it is to ward off loneliness, because it is socially acceptable and painted as a desirable image in our society, or because we are looking for a way to have our needs for love and belonging met. Everyone who has ever fallen in love knows that after a while, the buzz we get at the beginning of the relationship wears off. Some people panic and see it as a sign that the relationship is in trouble, others move to the next relationship seeking to find that feeling again, and others continue despite it's absence, and if they are lucky, come out with a deeper, permanent and more fulfilling relationship.

The initial stage of buzz can be termed "infatuation." Some scholars claim it is a chemical reaction essential to guarantee the continuation of the species, and some of them even claim that people become addicted to this chemical high, and will break up existing relationships to find it again. Others claim we view relationships the wrong way, and when we worry that the relationship is in trouble, we either bail looking for a more satisfying situation, or our anxiety drives us into deeper trouble as we strive to fix a problem that isn't there. If the partner's needs are not being met in a relationship, this is the time when the break up is most likely to occur. Life becomes more routine, mundane, and the original thrill of being together is watered down by bills that still need to be paid, and trying to solve who does what housework without a total meltdown taking place.

Somehow, whether it is through the media's influence, or the beliefs that are deeply entrenched in our culture, we believe that finding the perfect partner will make us happy. We will no longer be lonely, discontent, afraid, anxious, and our troubles will melt away like lemon drops, like Dorothy singing "Somewhere Over The Rainbow" in the Wizard Of Oz. We all want our deepest emotional needs met, and we all want a better, more fulfilling, less anxiety provoking life. Is it realistic to believe that finding someone to live with and love with will provide all this like a magic cure? We know we aren't perfect ourselves and can be selfish and miserable at times. On some level we may even be afraid that we will hurt a partner, and can't possibly be all we expect ourselves to be in a relationship yet, we expect the partner to be magically perfect and want our expectations totally fulfilled by them. Often this doesn't happen, and many relationships, by divorce or break up, fail and come apart.

Multiple relationship break ups in our lives create a whole Pandora's box of problems. We have to deal with the rejection, the insecurity and fear of abandonment these failures bring into new relationships, and we also have huge "social problems" arising such as unplanned pregnancies, and unmarried mothers who don't receive enough support with living costs and parenting. We can become bitter about relationships, jaded and we lose our trust in other people, yet we search on for that elusive someone who will make us happy. How do we avoid this mess?

Part of the answer is knowing what you want in a partner, and not settling for less even if the wait is a long one. Another part is learning how to make yourself happy, so you are not seeking dependence on someone else to have a reason to exist. Find out what you love to

do, what fulfils you and get out there and do it. No single person, or even a group, can fulfil you. Contentment is found within yourself, and that is the only place you can reliably find it once the buzz of love wears off, and your eyes are opened to find you have no knight on a white horse, just two very ordinary, imperfect human beings. The other answer is to hang in there with the partner you've got. If you are not in an abusive relationship and there are no major conflicts which make being together a nightmare, then be prepared to work on the relationship to see a mature, lasting love come out of it. Relationships take work. I am inspired by the title of Dr James Dobson's book "Love Must Be Tough." I have never read the book, but those four words have been a poke in the right direction, a reality call that shows me there is a way of making it work, but I have to be willing to work.

Any married couple you speak to who have been together for over twenty five years will tell you there have been good times and bad. There are times when you want to murder your partner, and times when it all comes into perspective and you realise how much they mean to you. Relationships involve an awful lot of the mundane processes of living. They are not always a thrill, or a stimulating experience, but when you are in a good one where both parties are committed to making it work, it is worth it! As the quote at the beginning of this article says, it is only after a time of staying together and letting love mature that the real love comes into the picture. That is the love that is patient and kind, never jealous or envious, never boastful or proud, never haughty or selfish or rude. It doesn't demand it's own way, and neither is it irritable or touchy. It doesn't hold grudges. It doesn't keep a list of everything that has been done or said wrong. It believes the best in the other, it is loyal, and it is tough enough that it never gives up because it knows the value of the other person. Real love is not out to get it's needs met. It is prepared to share and to give, taking into account the other partner. It doesn't look for the hype and the buzz, it sees the person as they are, and cares for them. That is the best kind of love.



"I Declare Me Guilty!"

Are you, like me, your own worst judge? Do you mentally put yourself down and "nag" yourself over things you have done wrong? I get caught up on little things I do which I consider to be failures, then I doubly berate myself for blowing it in the big things, especially if I have accidentally hurt somebody. I've been told, and quite correctly, that I am way too harsh on myself, and it has, at times, led to destructive self hatred. I expect myself to adhere to my standards, regardless of anything that gets in the way. Thinking this way can come from being in an abusive family or marital situation and being constantly told you're wrong. You can also blame it on perfectionism, or you can put it down to having low self esteem. It doesn't matter which one it is, it is as important to be able to forgive yourself and let go of the disappointments from your own behaviour, as it is to forgive other people. We can become bitter towards ourselves, and even vengeful, punishing ourselves for not being perfect all the time, or because we said or did the wrong thing. Holding on to our self judgements produces as much poison in our souls, and is as destructive to our mental and spiritual health as being bitter towards others.

Forgiveness is letting go of the hurts and wounds of the past, and not allowing yourself to build up hatred or bitterness. It builds bridges rather than burns them, and enables inner healing. It acts with mercy, kindness and compassion, and doesn't shut us off from growth or healing. Forgiveness is simple and powerful, and essential to being able to move on towards emotional wholeness. It's opposite, unforgiveness, eats away at us mentally and emotionally. Over time unforgiven incidents mount up, causing us to feel like we are not the kind of person we should be, and believe that we are worthless and have failed. Letting go of our expectations of ourselves is tough, but it is worth it! One of the teachings of Jesus that I have the most trouble with is the one where it doesn't matter what you have done wrong, regardless of whether you have just accidentally hurt a loved one or have murdered ten people, you can still be forgiven. I believe God feels that way, but I don't forgive myself that easily. I have a picture in my head of what I want to be like, how I want to act. I can never live up to it. Part of me is convinced that to be worthy of love and acceptance by God and others, I have to be totally correctly behaved all the time: think right, live right, and be essentially perfect. God knows we would never achieve that. As Paul said, *"Have some of you noticed that we're not yet perfect? (No great surprise right?) ... I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God and it didn't work. So I quit being a "law man" so that I could be God's man. Christ's life showed me how, enabled me to do it."* Galatians 2 The Message

I lived by solid rules for eighteen years, believing I would always stick to them, be perfect and pure, never a big sinner, never need forgiveness on life's big issues. I failed. Not because I was out to rebel, but because I was human, had needs that required meeting. It didn't feel like sin, but I knew I was wrong, and I had to find a way to look God in the eye, tell Him what I had done, why I had done it, and work out what to do. Then I really began to learn about God's understanding and His acceptance of us. I also started to see other people through new eyes, and God started teaching me about mercy and unconditional acceptance. I realised, to my horror, I had become a bigot. I had my standards which were black and white, and I was judgemental with anyone who didn't keep them. How that changed when I was the one on the wrong side of the law!

We all fall away from our ideals, and we all act in ways at times, which really disappoint us later, and hurt ourselves and others. Everyone has regrets, and everyone makes a mess of things from time to time. The challenge is in doing the very best we can do, and learning

from our mistakes rather than constantly beating ourselves up over them. Certainly we should never deliberately go back to doing what we know is wrong and destructive to ourselves and others, but it isn't realistic to think we'll never drop the ball and make mistakes. I don't always have the inner resources to be kind to myself, and often I have to ask God for help. I am comforted in knowing He understands why I did what I did, and I am so thankful that it is Him, not me, who is ultimately my judge. God is much nicer! *"This is how much God loved the world: He gave His Son, His one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in Him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending His Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again."* John 3:16, The Message

You can go overboard and be totally self centred trying to develop a good healthy self-esteem. You can also be too humble and self-deprecating. The ideal is the middle ground: be kind to yourself. Credit yourself with enough value to take care of your physical, mental and spiritual needs even if you don't believe you deserve it. It is an asset to aim for high standards, but we need to also know that if we don't achieve them, we're still valuable, and we have a compassionate, understanding God who will wipe away the tears and heal us when we're in need.

"O Lord, You have examined my heart and you know everything about me. You know when I sit or stand. When far away you know my every thought You made all the delicate inner parts of my body and knit them together in my mother's womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! It is amazing to think about. Your workmanship is marvellous, and how well I know it Search me O God and know my heart, test my thoughts. Point out anything you find in me that makes you sad, and lead me along the path of everlasting life." Psalm 139 The Living Bible



How Do You Plead? Guilty or Not Guilty?

Guilt is my middle name. I feel guilty for not being more than I am, for letting opportunities pass me by, for not having enough energy to do everything, for not being perfect...I feel guilty for not being best at everything, because merely being good at some things is not good enough. I feel guilty for being emotional and spacey and focussed and eccentric rather than calm and cool and organised... I feel guilty about aluminium cans and eating meat and using cleaning chemicals and having three children and driving a car - ecoguilt. However, I am still not guilty enough to change my bad habits. I feel guilty for liking myself even though I am convinced I've failed completely at being perfect."

We all carry a substantial burden of guilt, both consciously and unconsciously, myself included. This quote got me thinking about what I feel guilty about, and I was surprised at how paltry some of those incidents are in reality. Still, they have significance to me, so I carry the weight. Dealing with guilt, or just trying to find a way to get rid of it, seems impossible, especially as the ever changing expectations of us as wives, mothers, daughters and planet-friendly citizens mount up and become confusing. How do you do the right thing by everyone, all the time? Yes, it's impossible, but we still attempt it. I admit I tie myself in knots trying so hard to be perfect.

The most complex problem is, how do we work out when feeling guilty isn't right, and when should we genuinely and justifiably be sorry? In his book "The Public Emotions: From Mourning to Hope," Australian author Graham Little says, *"Being found legally or morally guilty is a different matter from the 'guilt feelings' we talk about with our friends and therapists, and 'feeling guilty' is not the same as being sinful in the eyes of a priest or being thought immoral by a philosopher."* Its clear cut and reasonable to expect some form of judgement and punishment for committing a crime. Say if you steal, break traffic regulations placed there for safety, or even if you hurt someone out of jealousy or vengeful motives. There are times when we do need to stop, recognise what we've done, and change our attitudes or actions. The guilt that seems to penetrate the deepest though, is the guilt that centres on things we have done, or choices we have made where we may have been morally or ethically wrong, or even quite right, but we still carry a sense of blame.

Kathy wrote: *"That's what my parents have always told me anyway, that guilt is a wasted emotion. But they're awfully good at teaching me to waste emotion then! I feel guilty for not wanting to move back to my home town, for playing when I should be working, for working too hard when I should be socialising... for not cleaning my house..."* Guilt takes root when we go against other's expectations, or our best expectations of ourselves. Both can be realistic or unrealistic, and both can add up to a back-breaking emotional bondage that stops us from enjoying our lives, and feeling good about ourselves. The best, but often the hardest course of action to take to relieve our guilt, is to take a long, honest look at the situation. Step back from the emotions being brought to the surface, and decide "is this justified? Am I honestly guilty of doing something damaging and wrong?" If you are wrong, realistically, what can you do about it?

Sometimes you can right a wrong, apologise, reconcile, smooth over hurts or repair physical or emotional damage. Sometimes you can't. Be encouraged to do what you can when it's called for, but realise you not only need the forgiveness of the wounded party; you also need to forgive yourself. Wrong is wrong, and it isn't good to hurt others, but also have enough compassion for yourself (without letting yourself off scot free) to try and

understand the circumstances and influences you were under, were at the time. How did they affect you? Was there any way in which you could have handled things better, or was it just one of those things? It is a great asset to have a good, rock solid set of moral standards and ethics that guide the way you behave. Sometimes though, kindness and flexibility in a difficult situation, has a greater long-term value than rigidity.

There will always be 'shoulds' and rules in our lives. The purpose of them is to keep us safe, and in some kind of order. There will always be destructive rule breakers, and also people that aren't evil, but sometimes just don't get it right. God gave us a clear set of rules for our own protection. He realises too that we are human, we're imperfect and we're going to make some mistakes. God's desire is to heal us, change us for the better and set us free, so we don't hurt ourselves or others again. We can choose to live in fear, or under guilt and a need for punishment, or we can learn from our mishaps, and let His love into our hearts to set us free from our shame. Sometimes the most helpful thing we can do is have a quiet talk to God, the ultimate and fairest Law-giver and Judge, and then we can go forward forgiven, freer and wiser. We can lay the burden of our guilt behind, and shake off our chains.



Guarded or Unguarded? The Danger of Secrets

What is your greatest secret? What would you do if you were ever found out?

Often we hide information about ourselves or our past, for fear of the consequences of being found out. Frequently, the consequence we fear the most is the ultimate rejection that we receive from other's danger or disgust at what they've discovered.

No matter how open or sociable, every individual needs some degree of privacy where their thoughts and feelings are entirely their own. The problem is, when do our secrets become a harmful force? When do our actions or perceptions start building walls?

How do you define what is a secret, and what isn't? For instance, a habit or an incident that I feel very nervous and shy about, another person will be completely open in regards to. Some people walk around hiding what they believe is a vital secret, whilst not realising that what they are trying to hide is blatantly obvious to everyone else. For example, they may be feeling insecure and protecting themselves by projecting an image of arrogance. However, a person with willingness, and an understanding of human nature, may quickly work out their cover.

In a relationship, secrecy can build mistrust and divisions. If a secret is discovered accidentally, partners may feel betrayed or lied to. They may reconsider the quality of the relationship, and find it to be less than they had previously believed. Again rejection comes into play with both parties. The "storer" of the secret feels rejected by the negative response they receive, and the "recipient" may feel rejected and inadequate as they were never trusted enough to be told, they had to find out the hard way.

What counts as a justifiable secret, and what is a fear of rebuff? The necessity of keeping a secret may be judged by the degree of hurt and humiliation to yourself and others, that will be created by it being revealed. The truth of whether that degree is correct or not, will be determined by how clear your perspective on the situation is. Before sharing, you may need to talk to a trustworthy person to receive another point of view.

A guy named Paul once said, *"perfect love casts out all fear."* None of us loves perfectly, but if someone genuinely loves you, and you are able to respond to that love, then the sharing of a secret can become less traumatic and safer. Telling your secret is a risk not to be taken lightly, in some cases disclosure may not be wise or even necessary. However, if your secret won't harm or hurt another person, and fear is your greatest barrier, perhaps the risk is worth taking. Shame scars emotions, but sharing may open a door to healing. If the person/s you want to share your secret with acknowledges your worth as a human being and loves and accepts you unconditionally, the what have you got to fear?



Staying In Control - At All Costs

There are not many of us who don't know what it is to experience the distress of being in a controlling relationship, whether the controller was a parent, spouse, sibling or work colleague. We all know the helplessness of being pressured to live up to someone else's expectations, and not being able to make decisions about our lives freely, or without opposition or criticism.

Psychologically we all need an element of being in control in our lives. People who possess positive control have a higher self esteem, feel more competent, are more creative, live longer and experience less stress. Feeling you have some control over your life and circumstances helps you to deal better with problems and crisis, and makes you more successful in many areas of life. On the opposite end of the scale, feeling consistently out of control leads to feelings of helplessness, depression, substance abuse and sometimes, suicide. How much control you feel you have, depends on what areas of your life you think you can control.

If you think you have a right to make people act in accordance with your wishes, regardless of their own, then you are well on the way to becoming an emotionally abusive person. People who are abusive do not possess the positive control described above. It comes from also feeling out of control, and when they are frustrated by not succeeding at bringing life into step with their needs and desires, it causes them to seek greater control, and leads to anger, hostility and depression.

It's easier to pinpoint controlling behaviour in others than it is to identify it in ourselves. One form of needing control comes in the form of perfectionism. Perfectionists believe they must perform perfectly in every area of their life every time, or rejection and ridicule will result. They may also project their need for perfection onto others. In their hearts they are trying to find success, fulfilment, love and belonging, but their demanding behaviour pattern and obsession denies them the human connection and excellence they seek. Their self esteem is low, they fear failure and can never relax and enjoy what they have achieved, as they are driven towards doing better, or reaching the next goal. Their obsessive behaviour is so consuming, they don't see the needs or hurts of others around them. Mistakes just prove their unworthiness, rather than being chalked up as positive learning experiences, and depression sets in with the disappointment.

People seeking control can experience resulting chronic emotional and health problems. They have a problem which is similar to an addiction, and they must be able to identify that there is a problem, and be willing to seek help for it. Justifying or excusing their behaviour will not solve the problem, it only makes it deeper, and it is even more destructive for both parties. It can be counterproductive to stay in a relationship where you are being emotionally abused and are psychologically unsafe. Nobody has the right to limit or remove another's personal freedom, or to put someone else down as being useless.

Below is a partial list of the indicators of emotional abuse. If you are experiencing more than just a few of these, please seek help to improve or get yourself out of the situation. You are valuable and deserve the right to live, act and speak as the person you were meant to be. I encourage you to take your emotional safety very seriously, and get help.

If you suspect you have a problem with being controlling or abusive, or if people claim you are and you don't understand what they are talking about, please also seek professional

help. There is nothing worse than feeling out of control, worthless, and at the mercy of a cruel world. There are ways of coping with the situation which will result in greater fulfilment for both you and your loved ones.

- Will your partner do anything to win an argument, such as put you down, threaten or intimidate you?
- Does your partner get angry and jealous if you talk to someone else? Do you get accused of having affairs?
- Do you feel you cannot do anything right in your partner's eyes?
- Do you get mixed messages, such as the reason you are abused is because he loves you?
- Are you told that no one else would want you, or that you are lucky your partner takes care of you?
- Do you have to account for every moment of your time?
- When you try to talk to your partner about problems, are you called names such as bitch or nag?
- If you wish to spend money, does your partner make you account for every penny?
- Does your partner blame you for everything that goes wrong?
- Are you unable or afraid to make decisions for yourself?
- Do you do anything you can to please your partner and not upset him?
- Do you make excuses for your partner's behaviour?
- Have you noticed changes in your eating, sleeping, alcohol or drug use?
- Have you lost interest or energy in the things you used to?
- Do you feel sick, anxious, tired or depressed a lot of the time?
- Have you lost contact with your friends, family or neighbours?
- Have you lost self confidence and feel afraid that you could not make it alone?

Notes:

Source and Checklist Copyright: Education Wife Assault, Ontario, Canada
<http://www.womanabuseprevention.com>



Failure Is Spelt "M.E."

"When I feel guilt, I feel that I have made a mistake, and when I feel shame, I feel that I am a mistake." John Bradshaw

We've all done things we're ashamed of, which we regret, but shame is, as Bradshaw said, when "I feel that I am a mistake." It becomes a part of our identity, the way we see ourselves. It entirely colours our self-worth, our ability to achieve or fail. We didn't live up to our parents', teachers' or peer's expectations. We're not the 'us' we want to be. Instead, we're a worthless failure, and there is no hope of change. Shame is associated with feelings of being unlovable, useless, unwanted, ugly, inferior, stupid, dirty or bad. Shame hides the real 'me' for fear of rejection and ridicule because the real 'me' is worthless as a human being.

Shame's foundations are, not surprisingly, laid in childhood, sometimes very early. It can come from mum and/or dad. "You're stupid." "You're lazy." "You'll never amount to anything." "You're nothing but trouble." "I wish you'd never been born. You were an accident, and I've regretted it ever since." Being caught up in incest, rape, physical or verbal abuse just makes it worse. Shame also carries into school years, if it hasn't originated there. Being compared to siblings who did better academically or at sports, not being a brilliant scholar, copping the teacher's disapproval for whatever reason. It can come or be intensified by playground bullying, name calling, teasing, rejection by your so called "friends."

Maybe you were clumsy? Maybe you did something wrong once and were met with a bad reception. Were you allowed to make mistakes and learn from them without being chewed out by someone for getting it wrong? Was your nose too big? Did your ears stick out? Maybe you were accident prone: a normal problem in a young, developing body, but if its met with criticism or rejection, it is a fertile ground for shame to take root and spread in your mind. Christine Evans in her "Life Matters" website says, *"Shame is above all a relationship wound... our identity [as women] is based on our ability to form and maintain relationships."* Relationship problems or complete breakdowns in your teenage and adult life add to that foundational basis of shame, and a your deepening sense of being a failure.

We all make mistakes, they are an essential part of growing. Yet, we take them to mean that we are a failure. You're not a failure. No one always achieves the goals they set for themselves, for a wide variety of reasons, it doesn't automatically brand anyone as a useless waste. Shame is a difficult mindset to break out of, as it is so deeply ingrained in how we see ourselves. We can try positive self-talk and reprogramming, but if we fail to achieve that goal, it takes us deeper into feeling a failure.

Healing does come, but usually it comes in gentle stages over time. Achieving small goals, making friends who genuinely appreciate us, gaining more self-confidence - step by step, it all adds up, and begins to change the way we think about ourselves for the better. Healing is being gently opened up to being loved, and to see ourselves in a positive light. To come to know what it is to be good at something, what it is to be loved and wanted unselfishly. It's a life-long developmental process, but be encouraged, life can improve, no matter how damaged we've been.

I didn't start valuing myself until I was nineteen. Until then, I wasn't ready. As a teenager I was hopeless at nearly everything, and it wasn't until was living away from my family home

with the freedom to try new things without ridicule, that I tested them out and discovered what I was good at. I have found over the last twelve years, where I fit in. I still carry some shame, but I am healing, and my self-image is more positive.

It can take a long time, but there is hope. One thing that has helped me tremendously is the knowledge deep in my heart, that God, who knows me inside and out, better than anyone, loves me most. I am not a mistake. I am His treasured creation, the apple of His eye. His unconditional acceptance, forgiveness when I have made mistakes, and His encouragement in His Word has been a great source of healing for me. My favourite verse comes from the book of Isaiah, chapter 61, verse 7. *"They were terribly insulted and horribly mistreated [shame and dishonour in many translations]; now they will be greatly blessed and joyful forever."*



Mercy In The Middle

There has been a great deal of upheaval in my life which has resulted in a lot of hurt, and grief. In the middle of this, it's been hard to trust God. At times I have clung to Him, and at other times, I have been very angry that He allowed me to get into a situation where I would be so badly damaged and disillusioned. I completely went to pieces one night, and God finally got through to me that He was still there, I just hadn't been able to reach Him as I have been stuck in my own pain and couldn't see straight.

I felt awful. It is the same as when you accuse someone of something they haven't done, then find out you were wrong. What could I do but apologise? The greatest thing was He responded with, "That's what I am here for." No offence was taken. He could handle the assault on His character, and it didn't in any way harm our relationship. That's pretty special. I don't know too many people who could do that so easily, and with so much love.

When I taught Sunday School, we sang songs with the children about God's love being so high you can't climb over it, so low you can't climb under it and so wide you can't get around it. They were action songs, and they were a lot of fun. The basic message was, you just can't dent God enough for Him to stop loving you. What I have learned in the meantime is, I cannot comprehend just how great God's love for me is. I get little glimpses every so often that blow my mind, but the full size, is way beyond me. I know He treats me better than any person has or will and that is as much as I can get my head around for now.

The trouble with really understanding where we stand with God is, He is so different. I know there are lots of Scriptures that teach us about how He thinks and feels about us, but it is not the same as seeing a smile on His face when He sees me, or giving me a hug when I need it. It takes longer for me to learn to trust Him, and believe how special I am because of that. I like some evidence, and due to His patience and great mercy over the years, He has given me some when needed. It never seems to be enough though, when I am walking through the blackest periods of my life.

One of the songs which has helped me is written by Amy Grant and talks about a little girl, who is now grown up, who was sexually abused. The lyrics are:

*"Ask me how I know there's a God up in the heavens,
Where did He go, in the middle of her shame?
Ask me how I know there's a God up in the heavens,
She says His mercy is bringing her life again she's coming to life again.
He's in the middle of her pain,
In the middle of her shame He's in the middle,
Mercy in the middle"*

It's that one line I cling to. "Mercy in the middle." That is what He gives me. No lectures when things go wrong, no screaming or blaming, no control and manipulation. Love and mercy. It's so precious to me. It is one hundred percent acceptance, and no one has given me that before.

There are many Scriptures that talk of grace, but I have never understood what it means. So many of the words in the Bible I skim over, and never go looking for the real meaning, but last weekend I looked up grace, and the meaning touched me. Grace is so simple. I've heard it called "God's riches at Christ's expense" and know all about how it relates to God

forgiving our sins etc. Grace is just simply love. Loving-kindness and goodwill. That is how God treats us, with love, and kindness. He wants the best for us (goodwill), so He gives us the best in how He heals, provides for, and forgives us.

Don't we all long so much for love? It is there, if we reach out to Him and receive it. For me, it means in the middle of my anger and pain and frustration, God pushed aside the wrong things I thought and said, and was just there for me. We're loved so much. He won't leave us, He just doesn't want to. He is completely absorbed in our care.

I don't think I will ever understand God's love, because my human mind is just not built to take in something so wonderful. All I can do is regard Him in awe and express my gratitude. Guaranteed, even with this lesson learnt, at some stage in the future I will get angry and do the wrong thing again. However, every time something goes wrong and the Lord reaches out to me, I slowly get stronger and more secure in His love. It is a process, and a great journey of discovery. I am so grateful He has never given up on me, no matter what.



Helpless As The Battle Rages: Emotional Abuse

As a small child I remember sitting curled up on the floor of my Grandmother's place. I was a small child, and wanted to be even smaller still, as I was trapped, watching my mother and my aunty fight to maintain the first place in their private battles for justification and superiority. I remember them drawing me into the fight, an innocent child pulled in to gain points in the midst of their fury of what had happened thirty years past. My aunty declaring that she loved me as much as my mother did. How could that be? What did I have to do with it? I don't remember. I was another point to score from, the same as I have always been with my family. I could have moved to another room, but for some macabre reason I stayed. I was watching what they were really like, and it has left such a profound imprint on me that I still have no love or respect for that aunty, or my grandmother who continually escalated the conflict for her own entertainment. These days, I don't even visit my elderly mother who lives around the corner from me.

Yes, that is an apt illustration of what I have been to my family. "Another point to score from." To give others a reason for feeling important or worthwhile, to be the one who was expected to rescue and provide for everyone - let others off the hook from their responsibilities.

The strange irony was that they chose the disabled person to do it; the one who wasn't supposed to be physically able to play all the roles; the one who was supposed to have no hope, no future, no independence - and no choice.

When I fought against them and proved how capable I could be, which they had not planned for, they thought they would use that too, to meet their own needs. What originally looked like an altruistic, selfless act on a part of a family willing to love and care for a disabled child, turned into the greatest battle and source of oppression I have ever experienced. I was there to give to them, and should I decide I did not want to do what they wanted, in any small way, such as having a problem at school they didn't want to face, being lonely or wanting to move out of home and have a separate life; I was selfish; I owed them for all they had done for me; and I was hated, abused and told I was bad. So was I adopted as a child or a piece of property?

Thirty one years later that battle is continuing. For you also, it may be recognisable in your own life as the dread when hearing a certain person's voice on the other end of the telephone, making their demands. It's when you feel insecure with people, who treat you both well and badly, expecting that you have always done the wrong thing, offended them and demanded too much of them in some way.

These are some of the outcomes of being emotionally abused. It may have been in your family when you were growing up, a best friend, a relationship with a dominating, manipulating partner, from any number of people or places. But the outcome is a deeply ingrained sense of worthlessness, being wrong, being bad, and being a burden whose needs aren't worth being met. Indifference also wounds. To be hated or have anger directed at you at least takes some energy on the part of the sender, indifference implies you are not worthy of any effort.

In healthy relationships there is room for equality and give and take. Each person is considered a valuable human being who has an important contribution to make, a role to play that you would have a loss without. There is love, affection, listening, time to play

together, freedom to air problems and grievances without the screaming, the blaming and the putting down.

The clearest indication of our individual value is received through words. Repeated phrases or names we were labelled with as a child often produce long lasting wounds, or long lasting self-esteem. Were you told you were a "good girl/boy" or that you were "stupid," a "nuisance?" Actions also speak louder than words. Sending children to bed or to their room when company comes may seem appropriate to an adult. But if that child is constantly receiving messages of being unwanted, or worthless, or "the silent treatment," then being packed off to bed in addition screams a very clear message at them. These kind of incidents occurring as a child grows up can create either attention seeking behaviour (often negative) or fearful, rejected loners.

It has been said that for every negative word spoken, it takes five positive ones to undo the damage. James speaks clearly of the power of the tongue. *"Even so, the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!... Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so."* James 3:5,10

So, how do you start to recover from the wounds of emotional abuse? Here are some suggestions for dealing not only with the problem, but also with the abuser.

- Go to Jesus and form a good relationship with Him. Let His Word and the Holy Spirit renew your mind, as you discover the value we have in Him, and how He sees us.
- Reparenting support from a loving Christian family (church), however not dependence. Realise Christians can hurt you too. Only God can give you everything you need without hurting you as people do.
- Establish new boundaries and the courage to maintain them, i.e. not being a doormat or a control freak. Pray for God's point of view on how much time etc. to spend with the abuser/s whilst maintaining boundaries without fights or being guilt ridden through manipulation, etc. You may need to spend less time with them and in less vulnerable surroundings e.g. public places, neutral territory, short phone calls and visits. In extreme or unresolvable cases, you may have to cut yourself off from them altogether, at least for a period.
- Be forgiving, but realise that you may need some emotional healings from the Holy Spirit before you can entirely let go. You need to be willing and making an effort, but it is a process that is rarely achieved instantly. You also need to forgive yourself and God. Whether you think you need to or not, subconsciously we tend to blame God for not preventing the damage, and ourselves for failing to meet set standards and be what we wanted to be.
- Don't dwell on what's happened. When big issues loom, deal with short accounts. When you get hurt, talk it out and deal with it rather than letting it build.
- Be independent of the "abuser" if you can. This may be in the areas of company, financial assistance, living arrangements, asking for advice and other help, etc. Take problems first to God, not always people, and take care of yourself without being dependent. Hebrews 12:1b-2a "...let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith..."

I know it is hard, I know it is unfair, and you will go through a lot of grief at the loss of the family you had hoped they would become, but no matter how heart breaking the circumstances and how great the damage, there is nothing that God cannot put back together. Your family will not heal you. He is the only One who can truly set the captives free.



To Build Up, Not Tear Down: The Value Of Balanced Forgiveness

Definition of to Forgive: *To free fully, relieve, release, dismiss, let die, pardon, divorce, depart, let go, loose, set at liberty.*

I always thought that forgiveness was "forgive and forget." Act as if it had never happened, the connotation being that I shouldered the brunt of the pain and offence, sweetly overlooking it while the offender got off scot free. The emphasis was on me being the "good girl," no matter what. Forgiveness never seemed to consider the need for justice or healing, nor was I allowed to say, "hey that hurt and it's not fair!" That would be selfish. I always seemed to be the one to lose, and that never seemed fair to me. I've never seen forgiveness in my family. The attitude has always been pay-back and nothing was ever forgotten, ever. If there was an argument, everything you had ever done wrong was thrown back in your face, even if it had been previously resolved. How long ago the incident took place or how insignificant it was didn't count, it was a permanent mark against your name.

I have always struggled to understand how you let go of pain and injustice. That is what forgiveness, to me, really means. It isn't supposed to be a Christian sacrifice of feelings and rights just because we are supposed to be nice, or well behaved. Forgiveness is letting go of the hurts and wounds of the past, and not allowing yourself to build up hatred or bitterness. It builds bridges in relationships rather than burns them, and teaches us valuable lessons on inner healing. It is not supposed to have a destructive outcome in any way. Forgiveness is simple and powerful, and like many, I have oh, so many problems achieving it! Particularly when the wounds are fresh and they really sting.

I always find it nearly impossible to forgive when I am still caught up in a painful situation. It takes me awhile before I can come to a place within my heart where I can start to let go and forgive. That generally only happens when I have had some breathing space away from the situation, so I can be clear headed enough to be able to see both sides. Often I discover that the person who hurt me didn't do so intentionally, and more often than not, they are hurting in some way themselves. That doesn't make the action excusable, we are all accountable for what we have done to others, however it does make it easier to let go of.

Even if justice or an apology never comes my way, I now know the best thing I can do when hurt is to take charge on my own attitude, and try and let go. The offender is often not affected by our lack of forgiveness, unless we directly attack in return. We are the ones who lay awake at night fretting and hurting, so to let go is to release us, maybe even more than it is to release them.

Forgiving someone is hard work, and one of the greatest lessons I have learned is to be willing to be patient with myself. I now know I can't just magically forgive instantly. I expect too much of myself. But I know I have to forgive, and not let the poison build up in my system. Some people believe that arthritis can be caused by bitterness and unforgiveness. Stress and unhappiness does biologically release toxins into our system, which do damage to the body over a period of time. Compared to the pain of a long term illness, it certainly seems saner and simpler to bite the bullet and forgive!

I know I am not alone in these struggles. Everyone has their "battle wounds," many which have been there for years. The initial lacerations may have healed, but there is still a scar,

and every time we look at that part of ourselves, we remember what happened. Some scars fade. Some scars over heal and form ugly ridges. Some still stay tender for years where the surrounding nerves have been damaged. So how do you forgive? How do you just let the past slip away as you walk free?

Like many attitudes, forgiveness is a choice you make independently of any other person or event. You have the choice to either stay angry and plot your revenge (and plotting a confrontation to force your voice to be heard can also be a form of revenge...) or you can make the choice to be grateful for your life and the good that comes out of your relationship with that person. Chalk it down to experience, allow it to make you a stronger, wiser, more compassionate person, and walk away. That also includes a willingness to be accountable for any destructive part you may have played.

What we do all need to understand though, is that forgiveness does NOT mean allowing destructive behaviour to be repeated by blindly turning the other cheek, or using a passive attitude to escape. If you are in a bad situation (such as domestic violence or sexual harassment), get out of it if you are able. If you are being taken advantage of in another way, stand up for yourself! There are times when it is appropriate to draw some boundaries, or even just let people know that what they thoughtlessly said, really hurt. Forgiveness should not allow cruelty and selfishness to have its own way. You can deal with problems with fairness, compassion and positivity. Just try not to let your feelings rule how you handle it.

Unforgiveness eats away at us mentally and emotionally. Over time unforgiven incidents mount up, causing a negative outlook on people and life, and crippling otherwise healthy relationships with bitterness. Letting go is tough, but it is worth it! I don't always have the inner resources to do it, and often I have to ask God for help. He is the safest, most comforting friend I can talk to, and He will help me.



Finding Serenity

One of my favourite hobbies is reading home decorating magazines. It's a way to relax, to dream, and I've picked up some wonderful hints and ideas that have shaped my home into a more pleasant space. One particular edition of Australian Home Beautiful Magazine (February 2003) kept repeating a theme which surprised me. It seems the trends in interior decorating were changing to a more emotive theme.

In the articles on "What You'll See In 2003," the authors were saying:

"It's all part of the move to more serene, sensual spaces."

"The colours are quiet and serene, all soothing greens and whites with hints of red, pink and turquoise."

On turquoise: *"Like the glimmer of a tropical beach... It's a serene, happy shade, easy to live with and guaranteed to lift your spirits."*

The pictures were of lovely fabrics, and beautiful decorator items, but the wider meaning got me thinking. Fashions in interior decorating are set roughly one year ahead. So that means the looks for 2003 were set around 2001 - right after September 11th, the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre. Right when anthrax scares were dominating newspapers. Right when terrorists were being tracked down all over Europe, Paris included. It is the Paris shows which influence the next trend in home design. The timing was too profound to ignore. What exactly is it then, that we are looking for? Just a beautiful home with relaxing colours? Or are our homes being turned into a vehicle which will help provide us with peace and serenity in the troubled world we live in?

I remember when my mother was having emergency surgery for breast cancer. I came home from school, and found that my older sister had decided to spring clean my room. The job was partly done, and my room was a disaster area. I broke down and went to pieces, not because my space had been invaded, but because in that time of great turmoil, the stable environment I had in my physical surrounds had been obliterated. Without being materialistic, our homes do provide us with some stability. Talk to anyone who has had their home destroyed in a fire, flood or other disaster. It is not just the memories and the irreplaceable items lost that matter, but the sense of stability is disrupted, which is incredibly traumatic. With war with Iraq approaching everyone is searching for some sense of security and serenity.

When we want peace in our lives, what is it we actually want? There is no way we can totally avoid heartbreak, and problems, so what is realistic? The Miriam Webster Dictionary online defines peace as "freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions..." If you search for the word serene on the internet, sites encourage you to make a garden, build a spa, get hypnotherapy, take up yoga, listen to relaxing music and put nature pictures on the wall, all to become serene. There was also one site for interior decorating which promoted "Serene Interiors - Indian interior designers providing designs..."

So is this how we achieve peace? Do you create an Indian interior, sit on a turquoise rug and practice yoga with the sounds of the ocean and pictures of water or sunsets on your walls? I don't know about you, but if I am scared of the future, the colour of the rug, the pictures on the walls, and any other interior decorator bits and bobs, don't even get noticed! The battle for peace rages in my mind. Considering that in any attack or disaster we could lose our homes, there has to be a more reliable way of coping.

Unruffled peace has to come from inside us. It has to be the kind of peace that no matter what happens, it can't be easily extinguished. Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary says: *"...peace often refers to the inner tranquillity and poise of the Christian whose trust is in God through Christ... The peace that Jesus Christ spoke of was a combination of hope, trust, and quiet in the mind and soul, brought about by a reconciliation with God... The apostle Paul later wrote that such peace and spiritual blessedness was a direct result of faith in Christ."*

Now there is an answer. Peace from the source of all hope, all blessings, all the good things we have in this world. The One who knows what all of us will say and do, before we say and do it. The One who cares for us, weeps over us, and always has a listening ear, ready to answer every call for His help. He can see far enough ahead to know what is coming. He can answer prayer to avert disaster. He can handle what we can and can't see, and His intentions towards us are only for the best. He gives us this precious promise: *"Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives it... (it crumbles at every new fear and threat). Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."* (John 14:27 NKJV)

We have a God who loves us and will take care of us beyond our comprehension. He works in the background to save us from our enemies and dangers every day, whether we see it or not. God's peace is beyond our understanding. That is how powerful it is. When we truly have hold of it in our hearts, we have hope and certainty we will be cared for, no matter what looms on the news in front of us. If you need a place to hide, and rest from the terrors this world keeps presenting, ask the only true source of hope, Jesus Christ, for His peace.

May God bless and keep you all.



Fighting Fair: Dealing With Conflict

Some couples seem to fight all the time over every little thing. Others only have an occasional row, generally after a lot of unresolved issues have built up, and then there is a major explosion. Accusations fly, and the real issues still aren't dealt with adequately. Obviously, as you can never eliminate conflict completely, the ultimate way to resolve them is somewhere in the middle. Managing differences in opinions and needs with the least stress is the goal, but just how do you actually achieve it?

Conflicts can actually make relationships stronger if they are handled with respect for both parties' needs, feelings and priorities. Dealing with each other's differences can lead you to a deeper understanding of them, plus you also become more familiar with your own values, strengths and weaknesses. Working together as a team, rather than as the opposition, can also give you the opportunity to bond more closely, and come up with creative solutions. However, if you handle conflict with complaints, accusations, nagging and the stand that the only answer is the one which meets your needs and desires best, don't expect anything other than to leave a trail of pain and destruction behind you.

Just because you disagree on something doesn't mean that the relationship is in trouble. Dealing effectively with conflict takes a choice to be loving, compassionate, unselfish and to be prepared to really listen to the other person, and consider their view. You must be willing to cool down, and step into their shoes.

Conflicts have two components, neither of which can be ignored if you want to resolve the issue. The first is the actual topic which is at the centre of the 'hot' debate. For example, it may be him spending too much time at work or watching sports on T.V. Or it may be her spending too much time nagging, or expecting the house to be perfect. The second component is the emotions which are going on underneath. You may be feeling jealous, inferior, rejected or hurt in some manner, and that is what makes you fight back. You are taking a stand for survival emotionally, whether you are aware of it or not.

A common example is a wife is complaining that he never helps around the house, the topic may be his perceived laziness, however the emotion may be insecurity or hurt. Her belief may be that time spent helping her gives her more value. She may feel neglected, unwanted and inferior. Not only does a more equal distribution of work need to be negotiated, she may need the reassurance that she is not worthless and hasn't been abandoned. The same goes the opposite way. Men often think the housework is more important than them. They may need to know that it is not the case, and maybe some tasks may need to go undone to spend some more time with him doing other things.

You must address both topic and emotions, or resolution will never come. In a conflict when you stand to lose something that is of importance to you, you need to know you have been listened to, and that the whole story, and all the reasons have been considered. Otherwise you will feel the final outcome is unfair and that you have been cheated. You need to be able to talk and listen without feeling attacked or that you're facing a brick wall. That alone can stop any conflict from blowing up into a monumental disaster.

Below is a list of steps for resolving conflicts which will work successfully for you with love, patience and practice. They have come from the Conflict Resolution Network (United Nations).

- Be willing to fix the problem.
- Broaden your outlook; try and see the whole picture, not just your point of view.
- If the problem is complex, write down what is happening and with whom.
- Think up as many solutions as you can, and then pick the one that gives everyone more of what they want (within reason).
- Treat each other as equal.
- Try and calm your emotions, and tell people how you feel.
- Get all the facts you can.
- Be clear.
- Attack problems, not people.
- Work on the positives, not the negatives. Look for opportunities.
- Think about what it is like to be in the other person's shoes.
- Would bringing in a neutral person help you come to a solution?
- Work towards solutions where everyone's needs are respected.

If you are still having problems, or it seems it's a conflict that just can't be resolved so both parties win consider whether someone is backed into a corner and needs to be let out. If there are areas of misinterpretation, do you need to develop a more trusting relationship, or make an effort to talk more? Try and find areas of common ground and ensure you are truly trying to see if from the other person's view, rather than using control to get what you want out of it.

If all else fails, you need to step back and do what you can towards your own resolution. The other person may have too much invested to be willing to sort the problem out. The problem may be pride, needing to win, or they may be controlling and in need of power. In that case, the problem belongs to them, and you can't sort it out unless they are willing to let go of their stance and be co-operative. That is the final goal, **to co-operate, not compromise**. With compromise, one party always has a greater loss rather than achieving a win-win situation. Win-win is when both gain something positive equally. In the midst of the heat and the pressure, try to find something positive to say about the relationship. Remember, you chose to be together for a reason. Don't let the little things create major obstacles. There are ways to resolve problems without anyone feeling its time to call the relationship quits. You can both win.



Grappling With Depression

Have you ever wondered why some people are prone to being depressed? I am from an abusive family, and there is so much emotional junk in my life and so many areas in which I still need healing. When my mother was alive, she was constantly controlling and demanding attention. It was making my life pure hell. I was depressed. I had no self esteem. I thought I was a worthless piece of rubbish, and I just didn't understand that God loved me for me. I had heard it said, but it never really penetrated, and I had said so many seemingly unanswered prayers. I felt like God was the guy you did battle with to survive, more than anything else.

One day I was in a worship meeting and God touched me in a way that I can't even describe. I don't know how He even did it, but He took all the depression away in a minute! I had been in counselling with my pastor every Wednesday afternoon for around 18 months and we were getting nowhere. I was miserable. I was broke. I hated living. If anything went really wrong, I just wanted to die. The effect was so strong, everyone at church saw it and was amazed. My whole outlook on life changed. I could get out of bed and not want to die. It was the best answer to prayer I have ever had, and He did it with so much love. Why that healing didn't come sooner I don't know, but I appreciated it so much more because I waited and it has given me hope ever since. I still get depressed, but each time, I come out quicker and stronger.

If the Lord can help me, He can definitely help you.

Technically, depression is a state of emotional inactivity, or paralysis, which we all can fall into when we feel like we can't take anymore; or when a chemical imbalance in our brain throws us in, no matter what's been going on. Anger and jealousy are active states that motivate us towards either resolution, or some kind of negative reaction. Though they can get us into a deep, hot water, they are a more positive state of mind to be in, as they do not lead to us feeling unable to do anything but throw in the towel! Depression has been described as anger turned inwards and sometimes it may be, but it's not that simple. Depression is not like those emotions, or any other. You can do something about being angry or jealous, with depression, you can't always bail yourself out.

In some people's emotional makeup, fighting depression comes with greater ease than it does for others. Some people fall into depression at any crisis, small or great; others live in a continual fog. Healing can get easier the older you get as you learn to become more resilient. The more emotional scars the individual is freed from, the less easy they find it is to fall into a state of depression. The healthy mind's natural reaction is to live to the fullest and overcome. It takes precedence over despair, and the person is able to rise above and work more constructively with the circumstances and pressures.

So, once you're in depression, how do you snap out of it? You can't always do that. If it is a chemical condition and you have experienced many episodes, you may need medical help. If the depression is caused by what you're going through now (reactive depression), be realistic. It will take time to work through, but with prayer, support and some practical strategies, you can make it. My depression was both.

Practical strategies that can help include being busy, but not so much that you avoid your problems altogether. Balance is the key. Stay away from the television, dramatic and depressing novels, or people. Don't overload on other's problems: stay away from them

until you are back on an even keel. Go for a walk, play sport, go to the movies with a friend. Talk out the problem with a trustworthy and appropriate person, or better still, if there is a conflict, work at resolving it with the other party.

The one solution which you cannot surpass, has to be a willingness to forgive any hurt, insult, or injustice committed by another. When you forgive, you don't just forget and allow yourself to fall into the same situation again. You learn and gain wisdom, but you don't allow the experience to consume you. Many medical and psychological practitioners now believe that diseases such as cancer and arthritis, come from unresolved emotional issues, particularly bitterness and grief. If you can let go and move on, you release your emotions, your body and the other person from a quiet but destructive force.

Our outlook on life can be one of the greatest indicators of how often we are going to become depressed and how quickly we snap out of bouts of misery. If we see our situations and future prospects through negative and hopeless eyes, we will continually be subject to bouts of depression. However, if we choose to live in hope and meet challenges and problems as avenues to learning, then we will rise to meet the difficulties we face with much greater ease, grace and strength. I am still working through my issues and from time to time, the black dog catches up with me. One healing was not a permanent cure... however, it gave me hope that whatever turned up next, God would also turn up and deal with it and He has never yet, let me down.



Wrestling With Relationship Disappointment

"Love that is chosen freely is an unbreakable tie."

I remember once being in church listening to a visiting speaker. He asked for every woman who felt deep hurts from her husband not meeting her needs expectations, to stand up for prayer. Nearly every woman in that congregation stood, including many single ladies who had also felt the pain of relationship disappointments. Every man and woman goes into a relationship with their own ultimate dream of what they would like it to be like, what they would like to see happen, but life rarely turns out in accordance with our plans. It is easy to hurt each other. It is easy to misunderstand, be unintentionally selfish. The actions and attitudes we know we need to develop to build a strong relationship can be the hardest to achieve.

In his book "For Better or Best: Understand Your Man," Gary Smalley says, *"Expectations can be one of the most destructive forces in your marriage. They can bring unnecessary disappointment and discouragement to you and your husband. It's like holding a debt over his head he cannot pay as he doesn't have the resources... The best way to decrease your expectations is to change your focus from husband as provider of all to God as provider of all. 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.' [Philippians 4:19] Let God meet your needs...Diminishing your expectations doesn't mean getting rid of your needs or wants. That is humanly impossible. It simply means eliminating your time limit and preconceived ideas about when and how these expectations will be fulfilled... the expectations...are like bombs set to destroy your relationship. The only way to deactivate them is to get rid of the timer."*

There is no perfect relationship in which we will never get hurt, however there are ways to deal with the rough patches we face, and there is always plenty of ground for hoping that marriage will be a success rather than a failure to give, receive and communicate.

The choice of whether or not to pursue love is one of the basic emotional rights we have as human beings. To me, friendship is the essential factor in every kind of successful relationship, be it a family tie, marital, or heart to heart companionship. It has the greatest value when chosen freely. Even with our families, we aren't whole, satisfied, secure individuals until we have been released from the controls and expectations that bind us. We need to find ourselves free to choose to love, or to walk away. This is the one precious, strengthening factor that enables couples to stay together: genuine friendship.

The closest relationships have the bonding that comes with true friendship at their base, and that is the component which stops them from fragmenting and dissipating. Through counselling training I have been repeatedly taught that a strong foundation of friendship is what makes a marriage work. The best marriages are the interaction of best friends. How does that work though? I have seen my parents in action, but I never identified their relationship as the equal of the kind of interchange I have with my friends. The two never came together in my mind. A relationship was either romantically based on passion, love and compatibility, or it was a basic friendship. It has taken me a long while to learn how friendship fits into the fabric of a marriage.

Friendship is a safe place. It is more than just sharing interests and being in the same location. This is where you know you are truly accepted as you are, where you have common interests and values, and where, most importantly, you know you're wanted. The

most valuable friends are the ones you can be yourself with. You don't have to pretend, to live up to an expected model of behaviour or someone else's idea of perfection. You know you can make a fool of yourself and they will still want to be around tomorrow. You can have fun, kick back and relax. It is at its basis, a trusting relationship.

True friendship will also tell the truth lovingly when we need to hear it. It isn't scared of discussing the deepest issues of life: the hurts and fears, and sharing joy. It is someone who doesn't give up on you, someone not prone to an "I can just walk out" mentality when the going gets rough. There is no judgement, no mocking, and no betrayal. It is someone to share the little things that happened that day with. It gives you a shoulder to lean on, a hug when needed. It is the energy we all need to keep our love tanks filled, and it gives us value and meaning as individuals.

We all need to relate to other people, and be it as family, friends, business partners or co-workers, a strong foundation of friendship will enable the relationship to survive and work. Friendship is the core to successful human interaction on every level.

I appreciate what Alan Loy McGinnis said in his book, "The Romance Factor." *"Permanent joy simply doesn't exist in this life... My goals for love have become more modest as well...and we've been together enough years to know that there will be more love on some days than others. Feelings of romance normally come in trickles rather than downpours, and once in a while there is a drought when it disappears for a time. But we do not panic; we have both learned to cherish the minor ecstasies available on any given day. Like the quiet contentment of a Saturday lunch on our patio, when we linger in the sun to talk and she reaches across the table to squeeze my hand. Or an evening spent reading before the fireplace when, if we do not have a lot to say, it is enough simply to be together. "True contentment," said G.K. Chesterton, "is the power of getting out of any situation all that is in it... When I counsel couples I tell them... if they will value love, in whatever quantities it comes, and delight in it each day, they will discover God can be very generous with joy."*



Dare to Dream

In five years time, all obstacles removed, where would you like to be? What is your big dream?

Without dreams, we have little reason or motivation for living. The human heart is built in such a way, that we need something ahead to aim for, something to pour our energy into. Often, the dreams I have had, turned out to be a gentle pushing of the Holy Spirit to move into an area I would thrive in. I thought I was being silly. He thought it was a great idea and He blessed me.

Through the media we are trained to view the world through a perspective of negativity and disaster. We're used to seeing problems rather than answers, defeat rather than hope. Subconsciously we watch the ruin in other's lives and prepare ourselves for financial collapse, marital breakdown and trouble with our own kids. If we are swayed by the problems in other's lives and don't realise our own individual potential, then our view of life will never grow to be much bigger than our own rut of self. We won't strive for a greater goal, because we can't visualise it happening. We won't expect a better quality of life, or to have our heart's desire fulfilled. We need to have a "postage stamp" attitude, choose a destination and then hang on until you get there, despite the bumps and the bruises.

In our society, most things are instantly or almost instantly available: food, finance, and access to worldwide information on the internet at any hour from our own homes. It's easy to forget the value and necessity of persistence, and not seeing what we want to happen occur immediately. Commitment is not necessarily a terrifying word, it can pay off great dividends.

We need to be dreamers, and to be around other positive dreamers, rather than the critics. We need to be able to expand our expectations and get a hold of a purpose and target greater than where we are now. Sure, some dreams can be unrealistic, however, the seemingly unattainable may be achievable by planning our goals in simpler steps. It is worth the extra effort to enhance our lives.

Switch off the news occasionally, unplug the television and let the daily paper line the bird's cage unread. Sit down and dare to dream. It may be a cliché to stop and smell the roses, however, if we don't, we lose a very important aspect of the way we live our lives. We need to play, sing, enjoy nature, sit in the sunshine and dream... hope and plan for a future we value.

Have a plan, have a goal. Seek God for confirmation of His vision of your future. Don't ever forget to dream and take the risk to achieve.



Coping With Grief

I can remember when my father died after a long illness. I was surprised at how my friends seemed to disappear, not knowing how to cope with it or what to say. The problem was, I didn't know how to cope with it either. Even knowing what laid ahead didn't prepared me for the shock of what would happen once that final phone call came. It was incomprehensible.

The loss of a loved one, whether through death, divorce or long term separation, is a nightmare that faces us all from time to time. For the people most dependent on that loved one, the finality and sense of abandonment is particularly traumatic. Death forces us to ask the question, "who am I now that this person is gone from my life?" The readjustment to a new identity and family structure is challenging and takes time.

Each loss is unique, and there is no solution or comfort which will be the antidote to every faced crisis. People have found that having information available on how to cope with the practical aspects to their changed circumstances can help as much as emotional support, and provides some focus for planning their future. This information can cover not only financial and legal aspects, but also coping strategies and family support information.

Children cope differently with loss than adults. The younger they are, the less they will be able to understand what has happened, and how to deal with their feelings. Their sense of security and can be significantly affected. Like adults, they need to be allowed to grieve in their own way, and be given adequate time and patience to do it in.

The National Mental Health Association in the United States has a list of useful suggestions for handling grief on its web site. <http://www.nmha.org> The most important is to recognise the different symptoms of grief, and allow yourself to go through the emotions rather than shutting your feelings out or denying them rather than make others feel uncomfortable. Other than that, strategies which can help include seeking out caring people who understand and will support you, rather than just putting on band-aids and murmuring meaningless platitudes. Don't neglect yourself either. You still need a good diet, some exercise and plenty of sleep. It can be hard to remember to get on with such comparatively trivial things during a hard time, but you don't want to end up feeling sick on top of it either. If you need help, go have a talk with your family doctor.

When you are grieving it is not a good time to make important long-term changes in your life such as moving, starting a new job (unless financially necessary) etc. Be patient with yourself. You need time to recover and decide what to do next with a clear head. Try and look towards the future and getting through each day without becoming stuck in the past, and if you feel trapped in misery or have been depressed for a long time, get yourself some professional help. Most depression is treatable, and just because you have experienced loss doesn't mean you have to be miserable for months at a time.

If you are supporting a friend or relative who is grieving, be there to listen and help in a practical way. Remember that trite observations and clichés won't help. Listening and giving long term unconditional love are the best gifts that you can give.

Some people find it helpful to adopt a ritual they can use to remember and honour their lost loved one. This may be keeping a place set for them at the table on family occasions, lighting a candle, or even talking to them occasionally. Don't dispose of their possessions

too fast. What is at one stage a painful reminder can later be a great comfort. Don't be scared to remember your loved one. Plant a tree, make a donation to a charity in their name, allow them a place to still live on in your heart.



The Value Of Dads

I had a chequered relationship with my Dad. When I was little I was called "Daddy's girl," and my mum tells stories of how when they first met me at the adoption home, I settled in Dad's arms like a duck taking to water. The relationship with my mother was the exact opposite. Dad and I had our ups and downs, and I know at times I hurt him very badly, but I shared a bond with him which was a great asset. He was the one who taught me practical skills, encouraged me and was proud of me. Dad believed I had the intelligence and the sense to make decisions for myself. He was never judgemental, though his temper did frighten me. Dad taught me how to drive, how to fix things in my first home, and when I would not let my mother near me, Dad was always welcome. He wasn't perfect, but neither was I, and I appreciate him. I know there are a lot of deadbeat dads out there: both living with and divorced from their children emotionally and physically. But whatever way you look at it, kids need dads.

The Centre For Successful Fathering says that kids with dads are more ambitious, less susceptible to peer pressure, more competent, more self protective and self reliant, and more confident in their male or female identity than kids with dads who are not around emotionally and/or physically. Kids with actively involved fathers are also statistically shown to be less likely to drop out of school, get in trouble with the law, become teenage mothers (pregnancy), will be more likely to attend college, less likely to get into substance abuse and have better mental health and all that is regardless of the parents' race, income or education level. Kids need two parents. As one quotation states quite aptly, "Divorced fathers are forced to recognise that there's no substitute for being there; or rather, there are only substitutes for it."

Kids unconsciously crave male connection as part of their emotional and psychological development. They need to learn how to relate to both sexes, and each sex has its own individual points of view which make up a rich tapestry. Children who are deprived of male contact go looking for it in the wrong places, for example, destructive sexual relationships or bad marriages. Single mums do a wonderful job of bringing up their children, but ideally, there needs to be participation by both parents.

I have a great deal of respect for single mothers. Many of my friends have brought up their children in some hard circumstances. What I am saying doesn't mean that kids living with mums are in a worse place, or suffering some soul destroying deprivation no matter what the circumstances. If mothers are attentive to their kids needs, and listen, support and are there physically and emotionally, that in itself has a greater value than an absent father. Studies on family interaction have found that mothers are more likely to talk to kids about drugs and other issues than dads. Mothers have enormous value and do a wonderful job in raising kids. It all comes down to unselfish commitment, and that is a major task for anybody.

When adults are asked what their best family memories are, often they don't report the big trip to Disneyland or other momentous events. The value parents have comes from the smaller, everyday things. These are what build precious memories and family bonds. Its memories of fun fishing with dad, family meals, bedtime stories - the little things are worth more than the big when done consistently, as they provide children with the continuity and stability that's needed. One of my favourite memories is Dad going through his pockets for loose change as I never had quite enough pocket money for the Barbie doll outfit that I

wanted. A child needs parents there when call for help or comfort. Equally involved parenting is necessary. Parenting needs commitment and consistency from both parties.

Dads get a bad rap for not contributing or being too heavy handed, and some deserve it, some don't. It's not enough just to be the breadwinner and financial backbone of the family. Material needs are not the whole story. Fathers can work long hours and end up with an ulcer or heart attack working to provide for their family, and in the meantime, the kids just feel abandoned. Dad is never there, he is always at work. He's not interested in us. Kids and wives want dad THERE. Money does not make up for time and communication. Quality time isn't enough either - it is consistency that is needed.

Parenting is a choice whether for mums or dads. It is a choice to make time, make energy and in addition ensure there is time invested for the health of the marriage too. Kids know when that isn't strong. Children act as efficient emotional weather vanes, you can't hide tension from them even if voices are lowered and they have never witnessed an argument. In a divorce, dads can be cut off from taking as active a role with the children as they would like to. This can come from custody decisions, geographic considerations and financial constraints. New marriages can also work against the role dads play in their kids lives, but they are still needed. There still needs to be room for children to be able to access their father, despite the hurts the end of the marriage entails. No matter what has happened, kids need dads.

Diana Thompson, Executive Director of the Coalition For Fathers And Children says, "We need to stop making divorce a gender war, and start dealing with the ongoing problems the children of divorce can experience if their relationship with one partner is terminated. Feminists who are truly concerned about equality must encourage the maximum involvement of both parents in all aspects of childrearing. Women need to be concerned about father's rights: the fate of men and women and their children are inextricably bound. Blame and selfishness have no place in the courtroom, especially when our children are involved."

Children are one of life's greatest joys, and one of the greatest achievements you'll ever make. Parenting is a tough job, and you will make mistakes, but if your kids are feeling loved and secure, they'll forgive you for them. As in all areas of life: all you can do is the best you can. It's all a learning and growing process, enjoy it, and enjoy your kids while you can.



Truth or Snare?

"Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power." Colossians 2:8-10

"For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Christ Jesus."
2 Corinthians 3:11

Astrology is creeping into the church, and we are unaware of its origins. Hippocrates was a resolute believer in astrology as the truth, in fact, he is even quoted in the Astrology text "The Compleat Astrologer" (That title is not a typographical error, even though it looks like one. The book is by Derek and Julia Parker) as saying: *"A physician without a knowledge of Astrology has no right to call himself a physician"*, (page 29). *"Hippocrates proposed that man's character was the result of the balance of four 'humours', blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile."* (page 28, Parker) The handbooks and information packages on temperament counselling refer to Hippocrates (460-377BC), a Greek Philosopher and Doctor, who is part of the basis of the temperament theory. The temperaments literature does not, however, mention Hippocrates close association with astrology, or any other association with astrology. Because of this, I've been concerned about the focus on temperaments, which has crept into Christian Counselling from authors such as Timothy La Haye, Bill Newman and Florence Littauer.

Several years ago, I went to our local city library to find out where information on the temperaments can be found. The psychology section, which I automatically tried first, led me straight to the astrology section, where I was shocked to find detailed information. After discovering the link between temperaments and astrological signs, I began to research further. I found the comparison between the four temperaments and the four humours to be almost entirely accurate. For example: typical 'sanguine' temperaments matched with typical Air Signs - Gemini, Libra, Aquarius, and so on with all other temperaments, and astrological signs. Information to support this can be found in most astrology books, it took me little effort to find the material.

Because of the links, I am perturbed when Christians who are adopting a temperament viewpoint are interacting with "what temperament are you?" It opens a door to living within pre-determined identity boxes, rather than "I used to be.... but Jesus has changed me, and He's going to keep taking me from glory to glory." It is becoming a philosophy within the boundaries of Christianity, from roots that the Bible clearly speaks out against, (Leviticus 19:31 and Deuteronomy 18:10) and it can divert us from our testimony of salvation, which the Bible refers to in Revelation as one of our greatest tools to defeat the enemy.

Personally, I want to be a WITNESS! When I wasn't a Christian, I used to be a melancholy because I was in desperate need of God's healing. Then I was saved, and I started growing and changing out of my melancholy personality, because Jesus changed me and set me free. (1 Corinthians 6:12) Now, I'm not willing to be bought under the power of anything that is going to tell me I'm permanently stuck in a mould! Being labelled as melancholy depressed me by the mere connotations of the word. My identity belongs in Christ, under His mercy, grace and liberty. I am a new creation, because I have a heavenly Father who loves me, and is changing me to reflect His image, not man's ideas of me.

If you are into temperament counselling, please don't switch off what I'm saying. In the person of Jesus Christ, is all we need to be set free from every oppression, depression, sorrow and problem that afflicts us. Our restoration and salvation come when we cling to Jesus, rather than any counselling technique or philosophy. As for me, I like to know the truth of where things come from, and Jesus' truth has set me free.



Job and the Winter Period

You know you're having a bad day when you start relating to Job. When you start sticking up for him, then you're really stuck in the barren fruitlessness of a winter phase! I have often understood his feelings when he said:

*"Oh that I knew where I might find Him, that I might come to His seat!
I would present my case before Him, and fill my mouth with arguments.
I would know the words which He would answer me,
And understand what He would say to me.
Would He contend with me in His great power?
No! But He would take note of me.
There the upright could reason with Him,
And I would be delivered forever from my Judge."
Job 23:3-7 NKJV*

That Scripture sounds very much like me arguing with God. I desperately want to understand what He is saying, but I can't find the meaning. M. Scott Peck summed it all up for me when he said, *"life is difficult."* Christianity can be like marriage, it is for better or for worse, and at times, the worse is a rugged test of our faith. Making sense of life at these times can seem all but completely impossible.

It has never sounded to me like Job deserved what he got. The death of one member of the family rocks our world for months. The death of all of his children, financial ruin, sickness and disaster from all sides, seems to be overdoing it somewhat. Why did God go that far? Job wasn't just caught in a chilly winter period; his life had fallen down around him in an avalanche of disaster. It seems God allowed his situation to become extreme to prove a point. That is to Satan of all people; and I won't even start to speculate on the views of those who actually died in the process. Yet, somehow Job still managed to say:

*"Naked I came from my mothers' womb and naked I shall return,
The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away;
BLESSED BE THE NAME OF THE LORD."
Job 1:21 NKJV*

I would love to be able to admit that I have never charged God with wrong, never put Him on trial. I can't claim I have never told Him that He didn't care enough, accused Him of using me as a pawn in a game out of my control, or told Him that He had made a mistake. Many times, I have. I have screamed at God, and in those times, I have received the clearest answers. Sometimes God is silent, He steps back and lets me work it all out in the light of what He has taught me before. The test is whether I act in faith in the end, or remain an accuser. Am I able to say, *"Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him."* (Job 13:15 NKJV) It seems to me that the stronger the pain, the greater the Grace God makes available. When I go over the edge, I always feel guilty that Jesus had to die to cover my ignorant tantrum, but isn't that love? He has the understanding of acute pain, and how blinding it can be.

I am often not justified in what I say to God. I have often told Him that I would understand and it is His perfect right to strike a bolt of lightning through me for being so bold. However, if the *"earnest (heartfelt, continued) prayer of a righteous man makes tremendous power available - dynamic in it's working,"* (James 5:16 Amplified Bible) then perhaps my roar is a

prayer for help, and a prayer of faith? To blame God takes a belief in God, and to view Him as being the one withholding the blessing or the answer, takes a firm belief that He is truly a sovereign God that is in the driver's seat, controlling your life. Now that is a faith that pleases God, and saves outspoken children like me.

Somehow, the faithfulness of God always comes through, and the greater the problem, the greater is God's comfort. I have often received immediate answers that put me firmly back in my place. Through these answers, I have learnt lessons of how much God cares. Despite what I think of Him at the time, He is working hard in my best interests. For that reason, I will trust Him.



Coping With An Uncertain Future: Fear

I have really struggled to write about fear. Fear is an emotion I have so many battles with in my own life. Over the last few weeks particularly, I have been through family circumstances which have landed me into unknown territory, scared of the future, and still feeling the wounds of the past. The overwhelming insecurity I have been grappling with has been hard to conquer, and I don't think I've come anywhere near winning yet. I am not an emotional wonder woman. I guess it proves that I am merely human.

Fear has been pulled apart and analysed by so many different professionals, to me, there are too many opinions on how to overcome it to make sense of it all. Some say fear is bad, some say it is good as it protects us. We experience fear when faced with a situation we don't know if we can cope with or not. Our lives may be threatened, or we may be scared of losing something important to us, whether that is a person, our job, or a valued possession. We can fear anything you can think of, whether it is logical or not. The more we feel we cannot exist and be happy without that thing or person, the more intense the fear will be. You can also become preoccupied with what you are afraid of, and some people develop panic attacks or phobias.

The origin of the word 'fear,' can be traced back to the Saxon word 'var, meaning 'to ambush.' Few of us live under the pressures of our culture and the media input of gloom, doom and disaster without feeling ambushed. We often feel overwhelmed, left with no way to cope with our anxieties. You can't buy your way out of a car crash you can't foresee. You can't buy a vaccine against AIDS or cancer or heartbreak. Fear is more than hating spiders or mice. It is a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness, an uncertainty or dread of the future, or entrapment in your past. It is knowing that there may be harder times ahead, and where are the solutions? Where do you run and find peace? Fear produces tunnel vision. We see disaster, pain, pandemonium and only in a certain way. We can suffer analysis paralysis as we struggle to find solutions.

Fear is compounded if we're also experiencing grief. Not only are you hurting as you have lost someone dear, but you are also scared for your own safety. We don't know what the future holds. In a world in chaos, tomorrow is pretty scary. Grief has stages you go through: denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and finally acceptance. We all move up and down through the stages at different speeds. If you get stuck in one stage, you can't move on. Some people get stuck in denial: it hasn't happened, or it won't happen to me. Some are trapped in anger and want revenge. Other people stay locked into depression wondering why, and their lives seem meaningless for a long time as they endlessly grieve. Everyone moves through the stages at their own pace, depending on what they believe. If you think the world is a savage place, you will take longer to heal than if you believe that despite the hurts, life has good points, and is worth living. Positive people heal faster. That is one piece of study that everyone seems to agree on.

A great deal of advice on dealing with fear was handed out through the media after September 11, 2001. One professional said, try and get back to normal. There is comfort in routine. Another agreed, and said don't make big decisions or big changes now. Others said this is a time to re-evaluate your life for the better. Then worried citizens armed themselves with antibiotics against anthrax and wouldn't touch their mail without rubber gloves. The FBI gave warnings of more trouble. The President urged everyone to remain calm. Who were we supposed to listen to?

I don't know if there is a blanket answer that will comfort and work for everyone. I know myself, when I am hurting the most, what others say doesn't always help. Sometimes you get some wishy washy advice like "be positive" or "have faith." How do you even start to do that? I wish sometimes people would just say, "ok, step one is this..." and it would be something I could DO that would WORK! Life isn't that easy. I wish it was. I wish I could say, "I had a bad week last week, but the answer to making it better was..."

A few weeks after the World Trade Centre attacks, I was watching someone on TV today, who made more sense than any of the articles I had read on fear. She said that you learn from your experience with God. When He has gotten you through one bad time, the next time things are all wrong, you know you made it once. Then you make it again with His help, and you know you can make it a third time. It goes on and on, and each time you get stronger, because you know He will never leave you alone to be scared. So many times in the Bible God has said, "Trust me, I will take care of you." That is a rock solid promise.

I can tell you about the times when I was totally alone. My family was abusive, and my friends didn't think I was really all that upset and left me by myself. I would feel God's Presence beside my bed in the early hours of the morning. He never spoke to me, but He knew I was there. Someone bothered to be with me. He listened when no one would. You may think I was imagining things, but when you are totally devastated and in agony and all of a sudden there is a peace you can't manufacture out of nowhere, you know you're not crazy, He really was there.

All I know is when I am fearful, I talk to God. He has heard me before and protected me, I know He will again. I can chant, meditate, stop watching the news, go to bed and never get up all day, or burn lavender incense and I still feel rotten. I can watch TV and try and escape mentally, and the problems are still there. Only God has the resources to watch out for me. Only He can bring me peace when no one and nothing else can. He has never let me down through anything.



Conquering Shyness

"The shell must break before the bird can fly." Tennyson

When I was in High School, people thought I was a stuck-up snob because I wouldn't speak to them. It's not that I didn't want to, just that I didn't know how. I had no self confidence, and was very shy. One on one with someone I knew reasonably well, I was alright, but I was never able to do well in a group situation. I never wanted to put my hand up in class and answer a question. I hated anything that would draw attention to myself. When I was eight, my parents placed my photo on the children's birthdays segment on afternoon television, and I was embarrassed and horrified.

I'm not as traumatised as an adult, but if I have to take the initiative in a social situation, I still hang back and would rather hide than come forward. I just don't know how to start a sparkling conversation. I am a loner. I love people, but I'm far from gregarious or confident. Can you relate to this? Shyness is a common problem, and most people experience it to some degree. It can be a awkward personality trait which causes us discomfort, or a major handicap. When you become a hermit when you don't want to be, or experience severe anxiety or panic attacks in social situations, then you have a very serious problem. Most of us fall somewhere in the middle.

Shy kids may not just "grow out of it." Shyness is a behaviour that is learnt in childhood, and can become a life pattern. It's root is anxiety and insecurity. When your self esteem is low and you are afraid of being rejected by other people, it can be easier to avoid them and stay safe. The problem is, shy people want social contact, and the isolation can create depression and stop you from achieving the lifestyle, maybe even the career, that you want. Negative experiences when you reach out to people just teach you to hold back more, and shyness can become a self validating cycle.

It takes time and courage to conquer shyness. One of the best ideas is to start working on your shyness in a safe place. Join a hobby group or a small group where you are with people who have similar interests, and who you feel the most safe with. Try finding a situation where you are more comfortable and feel you can be yourself. Don't place pressure on yourself to handle the situation like a social butterfly first time. Change and success come in small steps. You do have to make some effort to be sociable, but you don't have to be perfect, and it's OK not to be. Sometimes our expectations of ourselves to be witty, vibrant, interesting and intelligent all at the right moments, are the biggest problem. If we fail in our own high expectations, we won't want to try again, even if we did receive a good response from others.

If people pass you by, don't worry. There will always be some people you get on well with, and people you don't. You will find other people who genuinely like you for you, and understand how difficult it can be to feel shy. I found that having to work with people I had to communicate with was one of the best ways to overcome my shyness. I had no choice, I had to perform ready or not, and people were very supportive. When people know you are struggling, they can be very kind. It has been a long, slow learning process, and I am not as comfortable with people as I would like to be yet, but I am getting better.

Let your disasters go, and summon the courage to keep moving forward and making new friends, step by step, week by week. Any changes we make in our lives take courage, persistence and determination, and overcoming shyness is no different. Change takes

time, as you are learning new skills, but as your confidence builds, the process will get easier. So be brave, plan a regular, safe social encounter and enjoy getting to know people. No matter what you believe about yourself, you have inestimable value. Every individual has their own combination of gifts and talents, positive traits and strengths. You are worth as much as anyone else. Give it your best shot, and don't get jaded by disappointment. You can win over shyness, it just takes time.



Rahab The Heroine

Even though Rahab had probably done everything wrong in her life, it only took one act of something right to have her immortalised in the Bible as a heroine. It is an excellent illustration of the bottom line of Christianity, the only thing that really matters is that we choose God over everything else, and thus we are saved.

Rahab was a prostitute. She was the lowest form of mankind in the eyes of the religious. Through her "contacts" she heard about the crossing of the Red Sea and the other miraculous acts God had performed for the Israelites. She knew the people were frightened of the children of Israel, and were anxious about their impending attack. Rahab wisely chose sides, she wanted to be under the greater more powerful God, not just out of fear for her life. As the Word says, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Rahab sheltered Israel's spies in return for her and her families protection when they attacked Jericho. Maybe this to her was a small favour, something that she had done for others in the past. Rahab knew how to survive, but obviously had a soft heart as she did not forget her family, wanting their protection from the spies. She was not like one of the young girls who flee to Kings Cross cutting off all family ties out of hurt and bitterness. How she wound up in such a disreputable occupation is a mystery, but under it all, I believe she would have been a decent person. Her heart was soft enough to accept God rather than laugh at what must have come across as some tall stories. She was open enough to believe and receive God's salvation into her life.

The messages you could glean from Rahab are undoubtedly numerous. God siding with the underdog, and not too proud to use a harlot to accomplish His purposes. She has been given more than "fifteen minutes of fame." Her acts have been reported consistently over several thousand years. There is no rock star or movie celebrity who will be able to claim that. What I have learnt from Rahab is that works don't matter. We come into the kingdom with a heart's desire to serve God to the utmost, and that is a wonderful attitude. Without our desire to serve, there would be no churches, no outreach, no missions into other countries and our own communities.

The bottom line however, is our choice of following God. Our choice to stay out of astrology, drinking, illicit sex, materialism, idolatry, lying, cheating and the many other forms of self-destruction and worldliness that are ours for the taking in this society. To God, it doesn't matter in the end, say at the point of death, how much we have done, how adequate or inadequate we think we have been for the kingdom, or what we have left undone. What really matters is that we have chosen Him above all else. That is not only our passport into heaven, but our passport into abundant life rather than a life of bondage, over-serving God to the detriment of ourselves and our families. We can be Mary or Martha working overtime to be acceptable, feeling the pressure to do as much as everyone else is, or we can sit at His feet and be awestruck and in an intimate relationship with Him, knowing who our Father is, where our hope is, and being blessed as we look back and praising Him for the troubles He has bought us out from.



Twenty Second Touch

We very rarely realise the impact we have on other people, especially when it seems to be the most insignificant contact.

Many years ago, I worked in our church office as a receptionist. One of my duties, typically, was to answer the phones, and on occasion, the Senior Pastor would receive a call from Pastor Laurie. Every department and visitor in a church of over 600 people converged on that small office, and I often found myself trying to work in the middle of a typhoon of busy people, frantic activity, photocopier paper jams and beeping faxes. It was often intense and stressful, but Pastor Laurie's calls always lifted the blanket of stress and put a smile on my face.

I was never on the phone with Laurie for more than thirty seconds before I directed his calls through. The main body of our conversation went something like this.

"How are you Laurie?"

"I'm blessed!"

And that's what touched me. I always had to stop and ask how he was, it must have started as a polite gesture, or an automatic one, but I loved to hear his reply. I have never met Laurie in person, have no idea what kind of a person he is, but his positive and strong response lifted me up. I don't believe in "positive confession," but I do believe our attitudes impact the lives of others. Laurie always caused me to stop and think of how blessed I was, as overworked staff rushed in and out, and the paper jammed in the dirtiest recesses of the photocopier for the tenth time that day.

As Proverbs states, *"life and death are in the power of the tongue."* Laurie was obviously full of life. Now, when the storms of life hit hard and I feel God reaching out to lift me up, I always think of Laurie, as he's inspired me to be able to say, *"I'm blessed!"* I'm now able to look around and see God's provision, and the gold linings in my life. There are clouds, but there are also hopes, joys, achievements and fulfilled dreams.

I still think back on Laurie from time to time and his attitude, and the lesson I learnt, has never left me. These days I try and say *"God bless you"* to people, but one day... one day I may change what I say to them. Something in me is still being pulled towards *"I'm blessed!"* I hope to be the inspiration to others, that Pastor Laurie is to me.



Do People Make You Want to Scream?

Have you ever tried to help or encourage someone who was in a crisis and felt like giving up frustrated? Did they seem to sit in a rut refusing to take the clear, sensible path of action?

What is it that makes it so difficult for people to take positive action to improve their circumstances and take hold of God's promises to restore and bless? It is the choice to live in fear rather than live in hope. When the negative circumstances build up and the level of emotional pain is high, it is very easy for someone to lapse into a world of negativity and inactivity, rather than to fight against the tide.

We are programmed by the media and society to focus on the negative and fearful, the hopeless, the seemingly unfixable. We are fed a relentless diet of political problems, violence, unemployment, abuse and the list goes on and on... Our attitude to life can become habitual, and coupled with the problems we face in our lives, without a balancing opinion we become fixed into a negative, hopeless mindset.

The answers are simple and too easily preached: trust in God, pray, read your Bible, rejoice as an act of your will, fellowship, claim God's promises. The person you are trying to lift out of the rut probably knows these are the answers and struggles with putting them into action. They may have already given up trying. In the end your "spiritually correct" replies seem to them like quick fix "spiritual band-aids" and you get nowhere.

So what do you do? You don't give up. You smile, you hang in there and you continue to pray. Walking out on the person in distress or laying the blame on them will only cause further wounds and build a feeling of isolation.

Develop a plan of positive action. If you know the person well, be sensitive to the signs that they are having a bad day or slipping into deeper depression. When able, take them for a walk or some other positive activity, talk it out, encourage laughter and "time out" from problems. Be patient, just be available to pray with them and keep replacing the negatives they speak out with God's positives. You can speak God's principles into a conversation naturally, without becoming "preachy."

Remember though to keep your boundaries. If you create enough space from the beginning so that they are not a constant pressure, when the going gets tough you have a built in avenue of retreat which will not look like rejection. Also, never be a lone supporter if you can help it, having more than one supporter in that person's life will build a sense of belonging and community, and takes stress off everyone's shoulders.

Lastly, remember God most probably will not heal that person overnight, especially if there are deeply rooted problems. God works in subtle, well planned stages with perfect timing more often than in a great fanfare of miracles. By supporting and loving a brother or sister, you bless the heart of God. So keep your trust in the Lord and the healing will come in God's time.



Bought At A Price

I have never seen a car say to it's owner, "Can I have \$60, so I can drive down to the service station and get some fuel?" I take the car down and refuel it so I can continue to use the car without it breaking down. Didn't Jesus say, *"Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"* (Matthew 6:25-26) I've never heard a car say, *"I'm sick of waiting for you! I'm going to get my own tune-up and tyre change!"* either. Just as well, we'd probably have a lot of cars, without drivers, creating havoc on the roads. But do we stop to think what kind of havoc we cause in ours and others' lives when we don't let our "driver" get "behind the wheel?"

Even though we carry the responsibilities of living we do, in truth, belong to God, not ourselves. Our lives are so controlled: by us. Our banking, where we live, how we live, the job we don't walk out on. We choose our partners, how much time we spend with our kids. We have favourite colours, favourite foods, favourite movies and television programmes. We like certain music, love or hate the footy. We drive the car we pay for, eat the food we select at the supermarket, plan our own weekends and the groups we belong to. We work for our money, make an effort to read the Word and pray, drive ourselves to church and keep our homes and lives in order. Then someone tells us to sit down, be quiet, cease striving. Listen to God and let Him do it. That too is so alien. Our minds struggle to get around this concept. We just don't know how to let go of the controls, not when we have to manipulate them from the moment we get out of bed in the morning.

The Father is far more motivated to ensure it runs according His plan and His people's needs than we are. He has made a far greater investment: the life, death and resurrection of His Son. Certainly, it's necessary to behave as adults, and our actions can send God's perfect plans askew, but we must be able to trust God in the functioning and development of both ourselves and the church. It has never been our role to "stress out," striving and worrying ourselves.

It is a simple matter to fail to hand things over to God, become more involved with our own plans and efforts, be too busy to pray, and plan without asking the "Master planner" what He desires first. We need to remember though, we are not the originators of our salvation, rather we have been "bought at a price."

"Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price..." 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20

Think of it this way, when you go and buy something, for example, a new car, do you leave it in the showroom and then go home without it? That doesn't make sense. When God "buys" us (we are saved by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross) He takes us into His home. We become His. My car is mine. I paid the price required and drove it home. Now that car is in submission to me. I don't abuse it, I take care of it. Legally, it is mine, and my responsibility.

We see with our eyes, hear with our ears, and then interpret it all, becoming perturbed. In Isaiah 11, Jesus was described as not relying on what He seen and heard, rather, He

referred back to what He knew of the Father's heart and prayed. Look what He achieved... Jesus also stated in Matthew 6:27 *"Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?"* We have to trust the One who loves us enough to buy us, that He will care for us as individuals and the church, and will supply every need... if we ask and trust. We, in all things, need to learn to trust the Father's faithfulness. When He promises to do something He will.



Back to Front

I understand what the Apostle Paul meant when he said, *"I thank my God that I speak in tongues more than you all."* 1 Corinthians 14:18 There are days when I'm sure I know why he did pray that much. Can you imagine being a key figure at the start of the Church, dealing with false teachings, bad attitudes, power plays, persecution and on top of that, living out your own daily Christian walk? There must have been many times when Paul was so desperate and overwhelmed, all he could do was pray, and pray and pray, just to keep his head above the water.

When we hit the hard times and our prayer life dramatically improves, we thank God like Paul did too, wondering why we've been such lazy pray-ers in the past. We know that when we put the effort in, God pours the blessing out, sometimes so readily that we're stunned that we achieved so much so fast. But as Jesus points out in Matthew 26:41 our spirits may be willing, but our flesh is weak.

I've learnt the hard way that if I get involved in something without praying first, I'm back to front. It's easy to say, "this is my gifting," or "someone's needed and there is no-one else, I'll do it," before asking the Father, "do YOU want me to do this?" We become overextended, tired and cross. Our joy disappears, Church is a chore. It's nothing but hard work. "But there are so many needs," I keep hearing. "If this group folds, these people will miss out." Don't you think the Father knows? Do you think His planning is so bad that He has forgotten to cater for every need - and can when we listen.

I am trying to learn to act the right way. Instead of quickly volunteering or slotting automatically back into an old role, I'm endeavouring to put prayer first. Sometimes it means I have to shut up, put everything else down and be humbly silent before God, waiting for His leading. Jesus, with as much wisdom, power and authority under His belt as He had always came back to the Father's Will being more important than His.

When we walk only in what God has for us, then we have peace, joy, strength and an unbelievable flow of blessings pouring out upon our lives. It's then that we are effective, not when we are overburdened and rushed, and not when we feel like we're in a rut. If we put prayer first in every area of our lives continually, then we'll have a productive year that will outstrip anything we've ever done.



When Life Hurts, And Faith And Prayer Are Hard

M. Scott Peck wrote *"Life is hard."* As prayer also meets the challenges of life, it is hard too, and sometimes heart breaking. In my worst moments, I seem to be split down the middle. Part of me believes God is for me, but part also believes He isn't. Part sees Him as a kind Father who protects, heals and comforts, but then it appears He doesn't always act like it. He is willing, but is He? I know He is good to me from past experience, and I know what the Bible says about God never ever turning His back on us. I also know that my vision is clouded and not seeing clear truth through my pain, but it is still so hard! Then I wonder why I do it. Why pray? Why believe in God at all? Does it really work? Is it all worth it?

Our success in prayer is not supposed to be as the world sees success, even though we unconsciously measure ourselves by the same standards. We think success is reaching the goal every time, getting exactly what we asked for, and sidestepping disaster and suffering. Our prayers have to be answered exactly how we perceived it, or we feel cheated and discouraged. We want to win, and we want everyone to know we won. We want to be recognised for our contribution. We want to feel safe, strong and like we cannot ever be violated or hurt. We want a 100% guarantee against disaster, in the same way we take out car or house insurance. Don't we feel so robbed and cheated if this doesn't happen? However have to let go, and let God do as He knows best. Jesus told us we would suffer. It is in our suffering that we grow to be people of faith, love and kindness. If we never suffered, we would be spoilt brats with no appreciation of pain, or the sanctity of life and love. How much more destructive to each other could we then become?

God has granted everyone a free will. Some will use theirs to hurt others, other will use theirs with kindness. Short of allowing God to control us like mindless puppets, we have to live with the consequences of other's bad choices. In a catastrophe of great magnitude such as a war, or acts of terrorism, there is great suffering. It is a cold, hard reality. We want the freedom to live our lives by our free will, as we please, and this is the price we pay for it.

The Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 4:13 *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."* I have heard this verse quoted many, many times, so often that I don't even stop to think about what this really means when I hear it. We take it for granted that God is 'on tap' twenty-four hours a day. How little we see of how much God is working in us individually through His Holy Spirit. How little we see of His daily efforts to build us up, make us stronger, carry us through, and guide our direction. I know I am blind, but this I also know, that there is a link between my Father and I, that no matter how lost I feel, remains. Through this He gives me strength, and through this He has made His mark in the innermost part of our beings which tells us that we cannot walk away from Him, we cannot reject the truth. Because of our connection with God in the depths of our spirits, we don't give up. We do keep praying. Thank God He loves us enough to be so intimately linked with us, and constantly working. Without His unseen efforts, I would have fallen away from Christ many years ago.

Keep going forwards, hold onto your vision, and keep praying with faith in the Father. He will never leave us with so little comfort and encouragement that we cannot go on, and as He said, He will never leave or forsake us. I know myself I need to be built up stronger in my faith. Jesus is the only one who knows how to build into me His strength. We all need to keep going, and keep looking forwards to better days ahead.



Follow Your Gift

When I was a new Christian, one of the popular songs we listened to was David Meece's "Count the Cost." The song talked about how you need to give your whole heart to the Lord and serve: the focus was intense.

Over the years I joined churches which intensified the focus even more. You had to be in ministry all the time. If you spoke to someone with a ministry of prayer, you had to be a prayer warrior. If you were around people with a music ministry, they thought you were lax if you didn't slip in and out of praise and worship all day. The Bible scholars were on you to study, study study!

It took me a few years to work out that those who had a passion for their gift, sometimes couldn't see past it: thus pressure was passed onto others to use the gift the same way. I understand. I get passionate about my gifts too and don't know how others can possibly function without them.

However, the trap for me was when the pressure to always be in ministry became guilt, when God had me taking time out. Sometimes I have had seasons away from God's work. I always felt condemned when that happened. I thought I was a fat, spiritually lazy, gospel bludger!

Then a fellow blogger put this photo on her blog and it spoke to me: *"God doesn't want something from us, He simply wants us."* That was not the way I had been bought up to think in church... but it did make sense from the Biblical perspective God was slowly teaching me. "Spiritual peer pressure" to perform had to be put into perspective. The Bible often refers to seasons. There is a time to rest; a time to work. I had to work with His plan at any given time.

So if you don't fit other's gifts, or have a formal ministry, don't fret about it. If God has a ministry vision for your future, one will come along in His own good time. We have strength and bread for this day and that's what we always need to work on: what He is teaching us now as we focus on simply just being with Him.



"What's Wrong With You This Time?" Children, Teenagers and Depression

For some of us, the haunting misery of depression is a familiar story. Up until two years ago, I spent the majority of my adolescence and adulthood clinically depressed and suicidal - but undiagnosed. When I look back, I see that my problems with depression started much earlier than adulthood or adolescence.

For me, the stage was set early in childhood. I was a solitary child, (not by choice) and didn't have many friends or adults around, so no one noticed it was a problem, and nothing was done to help me. My parents abused me for being moody and difficult, and told me to "snap out of it, you've got nothing to be miserable about." As a child I had to deal with the loss of my birth mother, the challenges and differences of my disability, a over-protective and possessive mother, and dysfunction in my adoptive family. By the age of eight I was taken through a battery of tests to find out why I had stomach pains all the time. There was no physical cause, I was a lonely, depressed, hurting child. My family put it down to not fitting in at school, which they expected would happen to a disabled kid, and nothing else was done. Some of my depression was caused by an undetected chemical imbalance in my brain, as some cases of clinical depression have arisen from, but most of my problems with depression were directly related to my inner pain.

Clinical depression isn't a short term emotional state that lasts a few days or weeks. It goes on endlessly for months and years, dominating your life and sapping your energy. It can't be overcome because things are looking brighter, or concretely improving. You can't fix clinical depression by positive thinking. It is a disease, in the same way cancer is. You can't re-programme yourself out of it, or change your routine and hope it disappears. With the increased pressures our children have on them, plus the onslaught of hopelessness the media brings into our homes, plus our mounting social problems, (all of which our young people are only too aware), not just younger adolescents, but children are now frequently being diagnosed and treated with clinical depression. A study done by the New York State Psychiatric Institute and Columbia University, found that depressed adolescents had a five fold increased risk of making a suicide attempt than an adolescent who hadn't experienced long term depression. Logically, if the depression starts in childhood rather than in the teenage years, that risk increases as the problems are exacerbated by the onset of puberty, and it's additional emotional and social challenges. Parents need to be aware of how their children are really feeling. Willing to look at avenues to getting them professional help, rather than trying to talk them out of their misery, or pretending it will all blow over in a few weeks. That is what my parents did, and it didn't work, it made me feel guilty, and even more miserable.

The National Institute For Mental Health (U.S.A.) lists the symptoms of depression as:

- Persistent sad or "empty" mood
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that you once enjoyed
- Insomnia, early-morning waking or oversleeping
- Appetite and/or weight loss, or overeating and weight gain
- Decreased energy, fatigue, being "slowed down"
- Thoughts of death or suicide; suicide attempts
- Restlessness, irritability
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions

- Excessive crying
- Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches,
- Digestive disorders, and chronic pain

In children and teenager's terms of reference, also consider:

- Have they lost pleasure in interests they loved such as sport, video games, band,
- being with their friends?
- Are there more problems at school or at home?
- Do they want to be alone more than usual?
- Have they started cutting classes, or dropped hobby and/or activity groups?

It's worth mentioning that this Institute also points out that "Though depression seems to occur generation after generation, in some families it can also occur in people who have no family history of depression."

If you can see signs of depression in your children or teenagers, or even if its you who is battling with these symptoms yourself, please, don't judge or try a quick fix. It isn't anyone's fault, it is a sickness that does have treatments (not necessarily all drug treatments either), and it needs to be properly identified and treated. Find someone who will understand and knows how to deal with depression in an effective way. Someone in whom you have confidence will stick with you, and be constructive. Don't stop looking until you find the support you need, and answers that are satisfactory.

My relationship with God and the support of my friends, finally helped me to overcome my depression, plus later I did identify some medication related causes. However, I never could have come out of it all by myself. There are answers, and for each individual, they may be different, but they are out there. I pray you will find the answers to meet your needs.



Making Life Changes You Won't Abandon

As a teenager I was always scared of change. Somehow the concept had come to only represent events that were destructive. I couldn't cope. I would even become insecure if my family rearranged my bedroom. I needed to have familiar, constant physical and emotional surroundings to be secure. Thank God my life has improved considerably since that time. Changes now don't hold as much fear for me, even ones that initially appear negative. There is always an opportunity to take a step forward into something better, a lesson to be learned, and also the proverbial silver lining on the dark cloud.

When I studied psychology and counselling I learnt how to make successful changes. I discovered common sense principles of being able to state what you wanted to change, assessing whether or not the physical and emotional resources were available, and enlisting support. There was considerable training given on goal setting: write them down or they will never happen. If you aim at nothing you will hit it every time. It was all excellent food for thought, however, the actual achievement of successful change always seemed to be elusive.

We can all identify many areas of our lives which we would like to change. The most effective changes that are made seem to be the small consistent ones. I have watched interviews with the authors of self-help books who now advise us to change just one small facet of our lives at a time. If you change one small area successfully, they say, the rest will eventually follow in good time. For example, to reduce stress just take a fifteen minute break for yourself once or twice a week. Go for a walk, read a book, write in your journal, schedule coffee with friends. You don't need to meditate for an hour morning and night, exercise religiously and breathe deep every hour on the hour. No one can meet those demands instantly. Small changes can be life enriching. They can release more energy and positivity to enable you to start to make the bigger changes.

Trying to do everything helpful at once, such as exercise, give up smoking, change diet, change sleep pattern and breathe deeply on the hour every hour will probably not happen long term. It's too much to get a handle on at once. Pick one; work on it until it becomes a good habit, then add another.

Making change slowly, one step at a time, appears a better method than trying to revolutionise our lives, then facing discouragement and failure. The same principle applies for relationships that need mending. You can strengthen your marriage by doing little things that will make a difference, such as making an effort to focus on what your partner has done right rather than wrong. John Gray, author of "Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus" states *"...Quite often, when one partner makes a positive change the other will also change."* Small details which we overlook and perhaps take for granted, can add extra life and appreciation to a relationship.

"Wellness and Writing Connections" on Facebook made a great point about looking making goals. (<http://www.facebook.com/WellnessWriting>) To quote the page author, *"Writing a list of the things we would like to see more of in our life is a common theme in resolutions. What if we also make a list of things we want to leave out?"* What if your major goal was to resist things that pull you down emotionally? That can make a massive change to your quality of life. What if it is to gently pull back from a bad friendship and set yourself free from it's poor influences? Sometimes knowing what you don't want is as important as knowing what you want.

In the end, no matter how great or small the change we have to face or make, or how lost, bewildered or alone we may feel, there is always One to whom we can turn. He is available and able to give us unlimited support and help. *"He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might, He increases strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not grow weary, they shall walk and not faint."* Isaiah 40:29 and 31



"How Could You Do That To Me?" Overcoming Blame

Found online: *"My son came over drunk one evening, and became extremely belligerent, to the point where my husband and I had to ask him to leave. The next day, he phoned his grandmother, and said we kicked him out of our house. He is not on speaking terms with his girlfriend, and has not spoken to his sister in 10 years. I'm sure you can see a pattern here. My question is, what should my husband and I do?"*

Communication problems in relationships make things so hard. It is awful to be misunderstood, or misinterpreted. It is distressing to be too scared say what you want to say. Not enough time made for talking and sharing, or feeling your needs are being ignored can be hurtful. One of the most frustrating and agonising problems is being blamed for something that isn't your fault. What can you do about it? If you protest your innocence you are made to look guilty. If you ignore it, it can still lodge in your mind, and eat away at how you see yourself and your relationship like acid. If the blamer is locked into a pattern where they blame other people consistently, unless they want to change, there is not a lot you can do about it. *"Andrew is very unpleasant if I have guests over for dinner. He refuses to socialise, and stays in the bedroom watching television until they leave. I can live with that, but then he becomes angry with me for "taking away his evenings." I realise Andrew likes to relax after a hard day at work, but I feel isolated and lonely. I say he is being unreasonable. He says I'm being selfish."* As Lisa has written here, the argument goes on, but is never resolved. It won't be resolved until both parties can look honestly at their feelings and actions.

Blame is not taking responsibility for your own actions (or lack of action), or feelings. What blamers say in a moment of anger is, as far as they are concerned, not their fault - they were provoked. The classic example of blame is the phrase, "you make me so mad." It is never the fault of the blamer, it is always yours. The reason they state as to why they never achieved or pursued their goals is because other things, or people, got in the way. They believe they are not miserable because they failed, but because other people treated let them down, so they never had a chance to succeed. If there is a relationship break up, it is the other parties fault. Sure, we all feel tempted to keep our copybook clean and lay the blame for some embarrassing incident or failure on someone else. That is normal human nature. We never want to admit, or sometimes even see, what we're really like, warts and all. All of us have made excuses for ourselves, but blame can become like an addiction where we consistently and regularly block out the truth. Blamers take the standpoint of living their lives at other's mercy and whims, despite how obvious the real truth may be. The end result of continuous blaming is the poisoning of our relationships with others, and the way we see the world. The poison in our hearts and minds makes us suspicious and bitter towards anyone who we perceive has wronged us, or held us back in any way. This in it's turn, can lead to hatred and irreconcilable relationship breakdowns.

People who habitually resort to blame feel impotent when they can't control other people, and thus can't control their world. "They put us in this position," blamers say. However, if you accept accountability for your part in being in the circumstances you are in (and your attitudes and feelings,) maybe there will be something you can do to get yourself out of it? Blame is a sign of emotional immaturity. Mature adults are able to look at themselves and ask, "Why did I act that way?" "Why do I feel this way?" "Did that happen because of something I did?" "Do I need to make changes?" Change is only a simple, conscious decision away. Our behaviour and feelings are our own, and even if feelings get out of control, we can still control our behaviour. We are not children who have no self control. It

is always easier to blame other people, but if it makes us feel worse, makes problems even more complex and starts to destroy our relationships with loved ones, is the price we pay really worth it?

Life without blame has many benefits, even if it is painful to see the truth about ourselves. You can be less defensive. You'll have a much greater sense of inner peace, especially as you don't have to use up as much emotional energy defending yourself, and making sure you don't get found out. Living in honesty with ourselves and others, and being accountable for our own actions means we can build more secure loving relationships, and be able to solve problems easier. It means being capable of growing and moving onto a new phase in our lives. You can't grow to become a stronger, happier person out of a dishonest foundation. Only by taking a long, hard honest look at ourselves and where we really need to change, can new growth take root, so our lives can start to blossom and grow.



Letting Go of Pain and Bitterness

I've had people say to me quite a number of times, "don't get bitter about it" when someone has hurt me. I always presumed I wasn't a bitter person. There was always someone I could compare myself to, who was blatantly seething over something that had happened to them. They hadn't, for whatever reasoning, let go. It was so simple to point the finger, and knew what they should do.

I wasn't bitter. I recognised that it could take me a long while to come to a place in my heart where I could forgive people, and be friendly again after I'd been hurt. I interpreted that as needing space to heal, and allowing myself that freedom. But bitter? No. Then relationships started to deteriorate in my family, and I was getting hurt more than I had ever been before. There was no possible resolution, I had tried and failed every step of the way to build better, less destructive communication bridges with my mother and sister. The situation wasn't going to get better, it just kept getting worse.

I have just moved out of my home state without telling my family. I didn't even see my sick mother before I left, knowing well, that I wouldn't see her again before she died. Some people have told me it was a cold hearted act, but it was emotional survival for me. I could have rung her, or gone to visit and not let on I was moving. I knew that the moment I contacted her, she would start abusing me for everything she was currently stressing over anyway. I am the family scapegoat. I am the one who is expected to be there to do everything to support my mother, regardless of the impact it has on my own life. Over the past few months, I haven't been there as I have had enough of being abused and accused, and just can't take any more. So I didn't ring her, I stayed right away. I just moved, got a post office address where my family could contact me in an emergency but not harass me, and I wrote to let her know I had gone. I didn't even want to do that. I want no contact with her or my sister, its too painful. I have done my best to be a decent daughter, but nothing has ever been good enough for them.

As I sat struggling with writing the letter to my mother, God gently spoke into my heart and said "you're bitter." That was a shock. It wasn't condemnation or correction, I guess God just wanted me to know that this poison was starting to infect my heart, and for my own good, He wanted to help me stop. I didn't think I was dwelling on the injustice of it all, or sulking or accusing, or bad mouthing my family, well, not too much anyway. I'm not a twisted, unbalanced person, out to get my revenge for what my lying, using, sadistic family have done to me! I had the choice to feel that strongly, but I just wanted to completely avoid the subject, forget the problems. My heart's desire was to start my new life and move on. I had attributed some of my mother's behaviour to her cancer, and I had told the relatives I just couldn't deal with her behaviour change, I hadn't drawn them into an argument to take sides or feel sorry for me. Was I really bitter? I realised I was. Deep down, I knew I was still hanging onto the pain. Even though I was trying not to be angry and destructive emotionally, I was still infected with that poison that was colouring my attitude to families and how I behaved. I couldn't look at anyone else's family and see them as healthy. I couldn't view a family as a good thing anymore. It wasn't a supportive, loving unit worth belonging to. Families had become, in my mind, a breeding ground for nothing but trouble and heartache. I could not forgive. The pain was too raw, so I focussed on my move and my new life, and forgot my own inner turmoil.

I was brought up in a home where giving forgiveness and letting go of the past didn't happen. It was a foreign concept. You had a right to stay angry and be vengeful. Even

after nineteen years as a Christian, I still struggle with forgiveness. I know everyone does, and I do get there, sometimes months later, but I would like to be better at it. More open and less liable to carry the sting of insults and rejection for months, having to "be nice" or avoid people. It's such a lead weight to drag around with me. The Bible makes perfect common sense. *"Let all bitterness, and wrath and anger and clamour, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, even as God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven you."* Ephesians 4:31-32 That's fine with me. Who wants to live with wrath, anger and malice directed at them? It's just so very hard to do though! So very hard to smile through your tears and even be willing, to one day let it go, let the wound heal clean, and move forward without ruminating over the injustice and pain people inflict. I know I would be emotionally healthier if I could stop thinking about how bad things have been, but I know I can't do it - certainly not on my own.

My family robbed me of a normal childhood. I was emotionally abused right through, am still being accused of treachery as I moved out of home eleven years ago - eleven years and I am still in trouble for wanting my own life. Don't I have a right to be angry? I know there are people reading this who feel the same way about things that have happened in their lives. I know you also understand how it feels to be badly hurt. I know everyone struggles with forgiveness and bitterness, and things that cannot be made right again. I also know how badly you can long for healing, and to be free of all the emotional baggage that weighs us down so much. Everyone has pain in their lives. But just how do you let go? How do you deal with it in a healthy way and move on without carrying the poison, and seeing relationships as a bad deal?

I pulled my dusty Christian books off the shelves and started looking. There are so many normal everyday people in the Bible who got hurt so badly! People with broken lives. Look at Job. There were women who suffered because they were childless. Men like Joseph, betrayed by his own family - just like me. What about Ruth? The one thing I noticed they had in common though, is they all became "over comers." They moved forward with a clear vision, and God healed them and blessed them. They had faith, and God used their situation to make them wiser and better people, and then He made them great. They called out to God for help, and the help came, no matter how much they complained and were miserable. Look at Jonah. No matter what went his way, he still whined at God. But God never turned His back on Jonah because he had a bad attitude.

It seems to work in such a way that the people who stay bitter end up with more trouble, and a bad name. *"Try to live at peace with everyone! Live a clean life. If you don't you will never see the Lord. Make sure than no one misses out on God's wonderful kindness. Don't let anyone become bitter and cause trouble for the rest of you."* Hebrews 12:14-15 Bitterness is infectious, it pulls everyone down to a miserable level. It will make the brightest day dull drudgery, and a good opportunity will be full of problems, because that's what bitterness does. It kills off vitality, hope and life.

I'm still finding it hard to forgive my family and heal from the past pain, but I'm going to try. All I know how to do is ask God to help me overcome my bitterness so He can make me a better person, happier inside, and much more at peace. I know only His healing can help me out, and thank God, He will help me do it.



You Put A Smile On God's Face

I've been through some really hard times over the past few years with serious health issues, financial pressures, losing a job I truly loved and the various other rigours life puts us through. One day I felt so low, I went into our local Christian bookshop for comfort. I'd been in there before and felt the presence of God. I made a special trip there that day, as all I wanted was to be near my Dad!

God did something really special. As soon as I went through the door, I had a really strong feeling in my heart, that God's face lit up in a huge smile.

For many years God has placed burdens on my heart to uphold others in prayer. Countless times I have been woken in the night to pray for people, or I feel Him tugging at my sleeve during the day to ask me to pray. Quite often He wants me to pray immediately. When we have a need He responds THEN. We aren't scheduled or stuck on hold in some kind of queue. Whether we can see or feel it or not, His attention to how we are feeling and His overwhelming love for us means we get absolute immediate attention, one hundred percent of the time: totally without fail.

Learning that has changed my life. I have gone from being a Christian who sat in church depressed and hopeless, to someone who knows that if God will disturb my day or my sleep for someone else, He will do the same for me. We are all loved equally. I too am the sheep He would turn the planet upside down to look for when lost. I am the one He wants to pull under His protective wings and keep safe. I am loved so much, when I seek Him for any reason, He smiles, as He wants to be with me too.

So all of us being equally loved: yes we are! You also put a smile on God's face. Every time you think of Him, want to be with Him, or do anything which shows that you have a love in your heart for your Father, He smiles. You make Him happy. You too put a smile on God's face.



Totally Addicted to Nice

When I was in Primary School, one of our teachers told me that when you write, don't use the words 'nice' or 'good,' because they are overused. Last year, a work colleague accused me of being 'too nice,' and if you believe the titles in the business section of the bookstores, "Nice Girls Don't Get The Corner Office," either.

I have a big problem with nice being totally out of fashion. You see, nice dovetails, dare I say it, 'very nicely...' with the fruit of the Spirit. Nice encompasses love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and self control.

I know I have a problem with not standing up for myself enough. I am a non confrontationist! So for awhile, I tried being less nice, too see if too nice really was a problem. I got noticeably grumpy with complete strangers when they were rude. I thought about 'me' more. I hated it. I hated the negativity it bought into my life. It was also as if the enemy was deliberately bringing nasty people into my path, so I could practice my 'non-nice' ways and go further to the dark side. Thing is, the dark side held no reward for me.

Unlike Darth Vader, going to the dark side struck such a bung note in me, I realised I prefer to generate peace, ignore the occasional offence and encourage people. I don't care about getting the corner office! I am not after power. I am more concerned with not letting go of the small tracings of the fruit of the Spirit that the Lord has been striving to build into me all these years.

So I am going to stay nice. Even better, I have started a 'nice offensive.' I am trying to actively bless those who have wronged me. I am going to try hard to spread positives: not complaints, strife, moaning, accusing, being unforgiving or vengeful. Achieving that is going to be hard work in some circumstances, but starting down the light path has given me my peace back.

So join with me and in addition to spreading the odd random act of kindness, spread a whole heap of not so random acts of niceness. We can make the world a much nicer place!



When Stubbornness is an Asset

You never hear the word stubborn used in a positive context; however, without it, you are sunk. It is one of those character traits that gets constant bad press, but is essential to survival in any tough situation.

Thesaurus.com lists stubborn this way: *"adamant, bullheaded, determined, firm, fixed, hardheaded, headstrong, inflexible, intractable, obstinate, opinionated, persevering, persistent, relentless, rigid, self-willed, single-minded, steadfast, tenacious, tough, unbending, unshakable, wilful."*

Ouch! It's the same as saying that 'stubborn' is made up of two four-letter words, strung together to create an obscenity. However, look at the gems that are in there: determined, persistent, steadfast, persevering. Plus in the face of cynicism, worldliness, rejection, needing healing, making relationships work, money hassles and life's other trials, isn't it better to be firm, fixed, single-minded and tenacious about doing what is right? Those are qualities which will stop you from abandoning your faith and good character.

Being too rigid and bullheaded may not be a character asset in life, but it can be when used to empower your personal faith and/or determination in ministry. So if you have a stubborn streak, when the road to success gets rough, wear it proudly. It will get you where complacent, compliant and yielding can never take you.



Barbie Dolls and Body Image: How Toys Can Distort Us

"Barbie was more than a doll to me. She was a way of living: the Ideal Woman. When I played with her, I could make her do and be anything I wanted. Never before or since have I found such an ideal method of living vicariously through anyone or anything," one Barbie fan stated. Like many women, I have always struggled with a poor self image, and a lack of self confidence, and I know part of it comes from how I perceive how I look. I can remember having a dream house, stacks of clothes and a camper van. However, I can never remember paying any attention to Barbie's looks or figure. I loved the house and clothes, I wanted a wardrobe like that one day, and a home of my own. I also had plenty of other toys I played with equally. I don't know that I go green at the sight of supermodels either; however my better-endowed peers have always provided more realistic or "possible" examples which I compare myself by.

The great tragedy is that no matter how attractive someone is, we all seem to suffer from the same disease of having low self image, being dissatisfied and rejecting ourselves, as we expect rejection from others. It seems to me, all to be caused by the more general disease rejection is in our society. It infects through poor family relationships, competition in school classrooms, media images and values and failed friendships and romantic relationships. It all piles up endlessly until we wind up believing we're of lesser value, and we're failures in a good looking, fun-loving society.

Barbie has been designated a symbol of our values. She is banned in Montpelier Vermont where she's viewed as potentially dangerous to little girls' psychological development. Internet sites have been set up to protest against Barbie, books have been written to expose her, and she has made controversial front page news in the media, including the Wall Street Journal. The heated debates rage for and against the voiceless, motionless blonde who started life as an 'adult' toy which was sold in Europe. Her initial use explains her strange body proportions, however, we need to continue to address the issues she embodies.

In response to public demand, Mattel has made some changes. The 1998 range of Barbies to go on the market will include a "more contemporary" and anatomically realistic doll, with thicker waist, smaller bust and hips, and flat feet. A long overdue change, according to the critics, who staunchly claim that the beauty ideal represented in Barbie, is linked to eating disorders, and increasing demands for breast implants and cosmetic surgery.

Barbie may add to the already existing pressure in the minds of some children, but to combat the problems from eating disorders and a low self esteem, you need to also deal with the media, the fashion images, and the sum total of acceptance, love and praise these children receive from their families. Identity, self-esteem and body image influences originate more powerfully from how children are treated by those closest to them. Children who are abused, come from critical, loveless families, or who suffer great trauma and rejection may be limited and bruised by these early injuries far into their lives, Barbie or not.

The challenge we all face, is our ability to face the reality of where we're at, and what influences us as individuals, and be courageous enough to reach out for love, acceptance and healing. There is an identity we can make claim to which has more security, and a greater impact than any media or toy's image. It comes from the One who accepts us as

daughters and sons, no matter how we feel about ourselves. He promises to give us double honour for our shame, and to heal our jaded, broken hearts.

If we learn to love each other and obey God on all levels, then will the super models slip off the catwalk, clothes come in a greater range of sizes, and makeup industries will watch profits decline. Maybe this is why there is no anorexia in heaven, we are so swamped and awestruck by the loving presence of God, we're blinded to our imperfections, or see them in the light of how insignificant they are to our Creator, who thinks we're perfect in the same way any truly loving parent idolises their children, their creation. Love covers a multitude of sins, and imperfections fade to nothing.

Recently, I read an article about "Donna," one Christian woman who lost 32kg in weight after calling out to God in desperation. Not only did she battle with being overweight, but she was depressed and felt there was no point in having dreams or plans, as she was never successful at anything anyway. God blessed and restored Donna, and she said in her testimony, *"I know now that He loves me, and also likes me. Not just because He is God, but because I am me."*

If you want to be loved, accepted, and you want to be Someone, reach out and embrace Jesus Christ, the One who actually delivers the promises He has made.

Isaiah 61:7 *"Instead of your shame you will have double honour, and instead of confusion they shall rejoice in their portion."* NKJV

Ephesians 1:3-6 *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons (and daughters) by Jesus Christ Himself, according to the good pleasure of His Will, to the praise and glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved."* NKJV

Back Up Research:

Firstly a few facts from the American Psychiatric Association. Anorexia Nervosa is a refusal to maintain body weight normal for age, an intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat even though underweight, and a distorted body image. People with Anorexia reduce food intake, and undertake extensive exercising. There may also be self-induced vomiting, and use of laxatives or diuretics to lose weight. People with Anorexia are unable to exert control over what they're doing; they may prepare meals for others, but will limit themselves to a narrow selection of low calorie foods. They may also hoard, conceal or crumble food, and can have episodes of Bulimia as well. Most people with Anorexia will steadfastly deny or minimise the severity of their illness, and are uninterested or resistant to help. Anorexia Nervosa occurs predominantly in females, and starts in early to late adolescence.

Sufferers of Bulimia Nervosa can be overweight, underweight or normal weight. They lack control over their eating behaviour, and have recurrent episodes of binge eating. Again, there may be self-induced vomiting and use of laxatives or diuretics, strict dieting or fasting, or vigorous exercise to prevent weight gain. A dominant factor is a persistent over-concern with body weight and shape. Binges may be planned. They will include high

calorie foods loaded with sugar, and easy to eat fast. Although eating binges may be pleasurable, they are followed by severe self-criticism and depression. Bulimia begins in adolescence or early adult life. Studies have found that frequently parents of people with Bulimia are obese, and obesity in adolescence can be related to the disorder.

Both disorders seem to relate to the individual striving towards perfectionism, and their desire to control their body to fit into the desired physical image which is prolific in media and fashion. If you are to believe advertising, having the right body also opens up the doors to a great personality, fun, belonging, acceptance, a great boyfriend (who will also have a great body), health and wealth. Many of us would credit ourselves with the 'sense' to know this is only advertising, but how much of that advertising is firmly lodged in our minds? It is probable that we are not even aware of how much we subconsciously and consciously respond to these cues in our environment. It's been said, "if you hear a report often enough, you figure it must be right and believe that is it true."



Are Feng Shui and Aromatherapy OK for Christians?

Over the past few years, articles on Feng Shui, aromatherapy and the use of colour therapy in interior decorating have become very popular. I realised that there was an ancient Chinese philosophy behind Feng Shui, but never stopped to think more about the origins of these articles, other than having a chuckle at suggestions to keep the toilet lid closed to keep the bad energy in. Doing some research, I found that Feng Shui is a form of "geomancy." In an encyclopaedia of religion, geomancy was defined as "a form of divination based on the interpretation of figures or patterns drawn on the ground (eg. Ley lines)... The term geomancy is also used to refer to Feng Shui ("winds and waters"), the traditional Chinese technique for determining propitious locations for towns, dwellings and tombs." I also found Feng Shui listed under a chapter entitled "Chinese Occultism." This concerned me. I wouldn't light heartedly read any magazine articles that were blatantly talking about Satanism, Gaia or witchcraft, but Feng Shui had looked innocent. How many other people would avoid it if they knew what it really signified, and the occultic power it was related to?

Australian Better Homes and Gardens Magazine (my favourite) ran Astrology, Feng Shui, Numeracy and Colours lift-out in their July 2000 edition. This was the first time I had seen them grouped together. Some magazines ran a monthly page on Feng Shui that didn't seem related. Their introduction stated, "This ancient Chinese art dating back 5000 years could be the key to complete harmony and happiness in your home. Use these general principles in any room, and feel the good energy flow." The subtitles in the article were "Say Welcome," "Room for Romance," "Be Creative," "Keep It Calm" and "Child Friendly." Sounds harmless?

Feng Shui was first used to predict the fortunes of following generations of relatives, by selecting where they were buried. The philosophy has since been expanded to include determining where to build your home, where cities should be placed, and these days, how to decorate and arrange your home for good fortune. Feng Shui is Gaia, or earth magic. It is about correcting energy imbalances which create "black energy" and affect people's lives. They have been held responsible for illness, accidents, poltergeist activity, and every kind of misfortune. According to the Chambers Dictionary of Beliefs and Religions, *"Feng Shui can frustrate or benefit human beings, and it is important that the forces of Feng Shui should be controlled for the well-being of humanity."* In simple terms, it is organising your life to get the best deal you can, and it tries to manipulate the forces of yin and yang to create harmonious balance.

Looking at The World of Feng Shui online, they claim that Feng Shui can be used to enhance every aspect of your life. Articles featured on the site include "Getting Your Partner to Commit Using Feng Shui," "Too Busy with Your Career to Find Love? Try using some Feng Shui to find your soul mate." "Bury A Lucky Money Box In The West: One of the easiest ways to enhance your wealth." "Do You Have Problems Conceiving?" After browsing I began to wonder if there was any more to this than another New Age money making tactic, or a way to try and control your life, grabbing some guarantees in a world of chaos. That would have to be one of the strongest appeals. You can buy a pair of Mandarin ducks to produce a committed, monogamous relationship, buy some jewellery which will enhance your happiness, buy a five rod wind chime to "press down" bad energy. Then there were many books and resources to buy which would all be beneficial.

Aromatherapy and colour therapy are other decorating techniques which appear totally non-religious. Aromatherapy, according to the Encyclopaedia of Occultism and Parapsychology, *"...is more than a simply a department of herbalism, since it postulates subtle energies of aromatic plants related to life force, which can be correlated with ancient Chinese concepts of Yin and Yang."* Colour therapy has a spiritual base in Hinduism. The October 2000 edition of Australian Better Homes and Gardens introduces an article on decorating in green saying, *"Turn to green for harmony and healing... Green is one of life's most adaptable, balancing and useful colours... Conversely, people seeking change and growth in their lives will often be attracted to zesty lime green."* In colour therapy, the belief is held that colours are energy, and to improve and balance your emotional state, you apply colours which relate to the chakras (cakras). These are the centres of power located in the body, according to Hinduism. Different versions of the Hindu religion identify different chakras. For example, green or pink is the heart chakra, which is located in the centre of the chest. Its qualities and functions are unconditional love, harmony, forgiveness, healing, compassion, understanding, personal transformation, warmth, sharing, devotion and selflessness. If you have problems associated with these qualities or the body, you apply more green, or its opposite colour if there is too much.

Everyone has a free will with which to decide what philosophical and religious path they want to take through life. As M. Scott Peck says, *"Life is hard."* We would all like to be able to direct events, our health and our emotions the way we want them to go. I can rearrange my home with wind chimes, ducks, crystals, incense, photos, mirrors and all kinds of techniques to try and manipulate my life to flow the way I want it to, but at the end of the day, the greatest predictor of my success or failure is my own actions and heart attitude. If I am selfish, greedy, hurt people, or set no goals in life that I am willing to work towards, guaranteed, success will not come to bring us safely through life's trials and imbalances. He holds the universe and our individual lives in His hands, and is an ever-ready source of help, healing and comfort. I've found that looking to Him for guidance and provision achieves more than I ever could by trying to buy a solution or control my life. When I can't, He can. He is a totally understanding, never changing source of hope and provision, which has set me free from my past and my worries to be a better balanced, happier human being.



Prayer Journalling to Stay Faithful

Prayer is one of the aspects of the Christian life that everyone struggles with! We know we should... we try and make time, and often we fail to live up to the goals we have set ourselves. Trying to get into the swing of praying, can feel as elusive as trying to catch the wind in a bottle. Once you achieve getting the lid on, suddenly the wind feels lifeless. I have been just as hopeless at prayer. I am not a formal person, and a formal prayer time just doesn't work with, or appeal to me at all. I am informal. I like to talk to God in the same way as I would talk to my dad - when something happened I wanted to tell him about, or share with him. No matter what I did, I couldn't get motivated to pray properly, so one day, the guilt drove me to ask God for help. God placed a passion on my heart for prayer that has been a constant joy, and companion ever since. Once I realised that I could just be myself, and I enjoyed talking to God, I was able to develop an enthusiasm for prayer. Now I tell God what I am feeling or what I am concerned about as it is happening, in the same way I would a friend. I also have a prayer journal I use. Being a journal keeper from way back, I sometimes find I prefer talk to God on paper. I can express what I am feeling better, it helps me work through the fuzziness in my head, and the act of writing helps me concentrate.

A prayer journal is just like any other kind of journal. You set aside some time every day to write about what is happening in your life. What makes your prayer journal more special than any other kind of diary or journal, is it is written to the Lord: one long prayer. If you have trouble getting up early to pray, or find it hard to close your eyes and try to stay in focus, maybe a prayer journal will help you. The act of writing will keep you cantered on what you are doing, and as it is addressed to the Lord, you will remember Who you are talking to. It isn't formal, but it can be if you want it to. It can also contain your deepest thoughts, feelings, hopes and dreams. You can write it in the same way you would write a letter to a friend, or along the same lines as a conversation you would have with someone you can trust and confide in. God is interested in every aspect of our life, big and small, silly or solemn. A prayer journal is a way to learn more about Him, and to track where you have grown and been blessed, as you read back through the pages.

If everyone was to write a prayer journal, you would never find two the same. We all relate to God in different ways. Some people call Him "Master", some "Dad," some have pet names. Some will tell God about their day: what worries them, they may write poems of praise, or copy down Scriptures that reflect how they feel. In a prayer journal you are free to relate with God however you do best. You can praise Him, ask Him questions about what to do, or things you don't understand. You can place your prayer requests down in writing for people you know in need, which can also help you to remember to pray for them again in coming days. Some people like to read devotions every day and write down what they learnt, or how it affected them. A prayer journal is also a great place for this. Others like to take their prayer journal to church or Bible Study, and jot down the points they want to remember. What you do and don't want to include, is up to you and the Lord to decide together. The main idea is to be open, honest, and to set aside that time as a part of your time with God.

If you are struggling with prayer, consider getting yourself a prayer journal, and see if it will make a difference in the way you relate to God. You may find it's easier to spend time praying on paper than you could praying before. Whatever your experience, my prayer is that you will be blessed, and that it will be a tool to draw you nearer to the Lord. If you would like to know more about prayer journals, I have put together a free eight week

course which will take you through everything you need to know. There is also a free email support group which you can join if you wish to. It is an opportunity to make friends, pray for each other, and get to know God more as you share with fellow Christians.

My ebook, Prayer Journal Workshop is free, via these links:

The Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/details/PrayerJournalWorkshopEbookV2>

or on my Google Drive Account:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B48Uj4PGwiVzT0hPUkt5M1NKKWk0/view>



A Christian Response to Bullying

Several years ago I read an article on bullying in the workplace which asked how the workplace had become such a war zone. Most of us have had to deal with difficult bosses and co-workers at some stage of our lives, but I was astonished to learn that the degree of aggro some people face leads to clinical depression and sometimes, suicide.

Bullying is a term we think of in relation to school kids, not adults. Sadly, bullying in the workplace is present in Australian society in almost epidemic proportions. Workers are often made fun of, excluded, unreasonably criticised and at times even physically harassed and assaulted. There are few laws to protect them. Bullying doesn't always occur because someone is incompetent, or physically or racially different. It can also happen because they are outstanding workers. Just like the school yard, if you stand out in any way, good or bad, you can become a target of serial bullies. These are people who make it their lifestyle to humiliate others to smother their own feelings of inadequacy. It is a power game.

I've had bosses who have been abrasive. I found that once I understood where their hearts were at, I was able to look past the prickles and we got along well. However, I find dealing with people that throw their weight around extremely hard to handle. How would I cope with that kind of behaviour as a Christian? Turning the other cheek or being a peacemaker is the ideal move in some situations, however, if someone is really stressing you and you are not able to just leave that job, being placid can make it worse. What do you do?

The Bible makes it very clear that vengeance is a NO! That is for good reason. Not only will you harm your character and reputation, you can also easily create grounds on which you can be disciplined or fired. God's remedy is to be true to yourself and your faith. Bless those that curse you; stand your ground by standing in the fruit of the Spirit and the good character that entails. Pray for them to be saved, moved on, or that God will open up a better job opportunity for you. If bullying is occurring because your work is excellent, don't drop the standard and cheat yourself.

If you are targeted because you are a Christian, as unwelcome as it is, that is the persecution we can all face as Christians. Your light is being seen by someone who finds that threatening. Your goodness is inflaming their inadequacy. Stand strong in your faith and pray that their hearts will soften to the Gospel.

Whatever the reason that you are being bullied, remember, God is for us. He has plans to give us hope and a future. Let your experience be part of what makes you stronger and not what makes you give way.

Notes:

For more information on bullying, please visit: <http://www.bullyonline.org/>



A Dangerous People

Being around other Christians isn't always easy. In church life, I have experienced many hurts and disappointments, and sometimes, the last people I want to be seen with are other Christians. We aren't the kind of people we should be. The world isn't just persecuting us when we're called hypocritical. Sometimes we deserve it, and I am as guilty as anyone else.

Because I have been hurt in the past, I can feel like hanging back from forming relationships with people God has asked me to pray for. I have wanted to hide behind a shallow, friendly exterior in which I have space to protect myself. I thought this was reasonable, but it didn't take long for the Holy Spirit to challenge me on my thinking. As a counsellor, I worked on the concept of professional distance. As intercessory prayer is draining, this seemed like a reasonable precaution against getting too involved. However, God works His church on a more radical principle: the principle of love and unity. In the Bible it fits together as an awe-inspiring picture of the kind of people we can be. In practice, we fall so short of the mark that society is littered with ex-Christians who won't touch a church anymore because they haven't experienced Godly unity and love. The whole problem with love is it leaves us vulnerable. We are open to hurt and disappointment because we have opened our hearts. Yet a church with no open heart is not worth being a part of. It will destroy more than it nurtures. So there was my challenge: to be a destroyer or a nurturer.

While I was struggling with the challenge, I was watching a documentary on the life that lived around deep sea 'ocean chimneys' in the Pacific Ocean. These are volcanic vents that release lava from the earth's core. It seems logical that nothing could live in the bottom of the ocean as there is no light, which is essential for life to exist. However life does thrive there, in the boiling water around lava flows. The scientists think that the heat acts like sunlight to allow creatures to survive. I was fascinated that life can survive in boiling water, and the idea of heat caught my attention. If life needs heat to survive, what about cold-blooded creatures? Researching further I found that cold blooded creatures have chemical reactions in their body that mimic the effects of heat. God's creation was in one way or the other geared to reach for the light and warmth or it wouldn't exist. I started to realise that I was trying to act in an unnatural way if I thought I could live in a church without giving attention to heat. We are all designed to live in warmth or love. It was impossible to outrun the need for love, and an act of utter selfishness to be unwilling to give it.

The Lord began to open my eyes to the power of agape, sacrificial love. I began to see that one of the major needs of both the saved and unsaved is love. If as a church we were able to fulfil God's vision and unselfishly and reliably love one another, then that more than any preaching, would draw in the lost. We would become a dangerous people the enemy couldn't stop. The church in the books of Acts drew in many people as they loved and took care of each other. There was community, bonding and a genuineness that was not found anywhere else. That is what drew people, not a new philosophy or radical lifestyle. It was the love. If I truly wanted to reach out and touch people, and subsequently cripple the plans of the enemy, I had to love. I had to give what I felt was too risky, and be prepared to be hurt, ready or not.

We say we want to reach the world. We go to church, shake a few hands and then walk out without getting involved in what is happening in other people's hearts and lives. Sure

there is a risk in making deeper connections, but if we don't do it, we are not harnessing the strongest life-giving power available to us. Love should be given freely with no expectation that it will be reciprocated, or it will draw the unsaved. That quality in itself provides the necessary genuineness. There is no demanding results, or giving up when they don't occur. Agape love keeps on giving despite any inconvenience and pain. God gave the most precious person He had to save this world. Shouldn't we be prepared to give the most precious thing we have to give to reach out to others and the lost? Without it, the darkness will prevail, and no life can thrive in it.



Biblical Celebrity: the Hazard of Fame Based Thinking

A year ago, if you had asked me what I will say to King David when I meet him face to face, I would have had trouble finding an answer. I expected to be really nervous! It's because he's so famous. He's a King and he's... well, he's David. I also have no idea what I am going to say to Jonathan, or Moses, or Esther, or Paul... and I kind of want to hide from the prophets, because I feel so inadequate beside them. Can you relate to that?

My instinctive reaction prods me into assessing about how much the worldly values of celebrity culture have crept into how I perceive Biblical heroes. The sad answer is, the secular image of fame has influenced my thinking far too much. Celebrity fills a spiritual void in the secular world. It gives lost people aspirational role models, regardless of whether they are saints or sinners. Who doesn't want to be comfortably wealthy, good looking, healthy, happily married and successful? In moderation, I could take it.

For that matter, as Christians, who doesn't want to be like David? Don't we want to slay giants, rule nations and live a spiritually successful life? Of course we do! I own kosher salt with David's name on it, and many secular and Christian movies and books have been written, using David as a symbol of success. God did promise David fame, but it has gotten way out of hand. [Ref. 2 Samuel 7:9] As with secular celebrities, we get caught up in all the glamour, excitement and intrigue of David's life, and we can easily, unconsciously make the fleshly mistake of treating him like a famous person, not like the servant of the Lord that he is.

Fame has nasty connotations. We all know who Oprah Winfrey is, but as much as we may relate to her and want to be like her, we know that we cannot be her. That is the unconscious lesson we apply when we look at any celebrity. "If only we could... but we can't." David is of such a calibre that we look at him in awe. We see him as an impossible person to equal, let alone beat. This can stop us from trying to follow his lead in spiritual areas and that should never happen. David should motivate us to imitate him through prayer, praise, studying the Word, submission to God, obedience, fasting and adoring the Lord. That is the pivotal core of every area of David's success; he didn't win because he was brave and strong, it was because he daily practiced those things, thus the Lord was able to use him.

Please stop there and read those last seven words again: "the Lord was able to use him." There is the real problem that Biblical celebrity causes: when we look at David and all he achieved, we stop looking at the simplest of facts: that GOD did it THROUGH David. As David submitted to God he became God's channel and all the success he had, really was God's... and David readily, publicly, often admitted that. (See [The Anti-King: David and Humility](#) link below.) But our culture teaches us to look at the man and not the boring, routine factors that shaped him, so we lose this humble perspective.

Ephesians 1:19-21 proves we can be like David: *"I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead..."* God's power worked through David as it worked through Jesus and Paul and now, all of us. Think of how much more we could grow if we caught hold of that truth and stopped looking at the people in our Bible as elite celebrities that we cannot be like. We must focus on how they allowed God to work through them, as we CAN copy that successfully. If we imitate David's spiritual habits, God can carry out His

perfect Will through us, which is our ultimate goal. We need a God fixation, not a hero-seeking one. (Please also read [The Habits That Built King David's Faith](#), the link is below.)

David was a humble man. He would never want to be seen as a celebrity, as he delighted in placing his focus on the Lord. For our thinking to be swept away by the glory and glamour of kingship and success, is to negate every precept that the Psalms teach us. David's words through the Psalms always push us in the direction of the Lord as the answer, we need to go in that direction and stop being distracted by wanting to be a giant slayer, or a king ourselves. It makes me sad when I hear Christians say how much they want to rule and reign with Christ, over and above them telling me how much they love to pray or hear God's voice. We're aching for fame and big, visible success: the things that are most likely to destroy us; and in wanting them, we ignore building our character and making ourselves usable by the Lord.

We need a reality check that pulls these worldly standards out of our heads! You have heard it before, Romans 12:2 *"Don't copy the behaviour and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect."*

Anything the Lord does in your life won't look like it did in David's and it shouldn't. God's love for you is so great, He will give you what is going to fit, bless and build you and the people around you. You don't need to battle Philistines, when you can conquer your own fears and hurts. You don't need to liberate a nation, when you can bless people around you and move them towards Jesus. We're not judged on not being like David, we're judged on whether or not we did what the Lord asked US to do. So let's get our heads out of the bright lights and go about our work with our eyes fixed on Jesus. It's exactly what David would also advise you to do.

*"Trust in the Lord and do good;
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.
Take delight in the Lord,
and He will give you the desires of your heart.
Commit your way to the Lord;
trust in Him and He will do this:
He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn,
your vindication like the noonday sun.
Be still before the Lord
and wait patiently for Him..." Psalm 37:3-7a*



The Most Important Lesson I Learnt When Studying King David

I believe it would please David to hear that the most important lesson I learnt, when studying his life, was not about him. Instead, it's been a journey of learning what the heart of God is really like and just what "the Lord is slow to anger and merciful" concretely means.

When I was introduced to the Old Testament, early in my Christian walk, I was led to believe that there was no mercy in it. Certainly, there is a massive difference between obtaining right standing with God through grace and the sacrifice Jesus made, and through animal sacrifices. Throughout the Old Testament, sacrifices had to be made to atone for the sins of the people. However, the heavy statement of 'no grace' was interpreted by me as "not much mercy."

Whenever I visit the Old Testament section of our local Christian bookshop, I am the only one there. The Old Testament is notorious for being a tough read. Life was cruel and hard. There were terrible wars, God's judgement on mankind was a heavy feature and He seemed to be in a bad mood, quite a lot of the time. Prophetic books overflow with warnings of judgement due to disobedience, and many people stay clear of the whole thing. We prefer the softer, more loving Heavenly Father in the New Testament. We don't want our ears burned off with tales of rape, child sacrifice, sexual immorality and fighting.

I can understand the revulsion and how hard it is to understand the old way of things; but to understand even the most basic parts of David's story, I had to dive deep into waters I did not like swimming in. I read of God's judgement of Moses and my heart broke for him. Not to reach the Promised Land after all he went through and sacrificed for the nation seemed cruel. He'd only acted disobediently once. Just once. I told the Lord quite plainly what I thought of that.

Then I got to David's story and slogged through the judgement that came after the affair with Bathsheba and death of Uriah, her husband. All hell broke loose in David's life and I comprehend why, but it still seemed incredibly excessive that he paid so dearly. To lose a baby would be bad... but... the rape of a daughter (Tamar), murder of his heir, rebellion and murder of his second son... isn't that too heavy?

So I was left with a decision. Was I going to tell the Lord off again?

This time I wised up. Something in my head said, "*stop yelling at the Lord, that's just not right.*" It's not. I had to stop and look at the heart of God. What occurred to me was how desperately the Father must have wanted Jesus to come to earth and become the sacrificial lamb, to stop the necessity for all this horrific suffering.

When you look at the Psalms, the number of references David makes to the Lord's unfailing love for him and His deep mercy, are many. Severely chastised as he was, he was on secure footing with his heavenly Father. David knew who he could depend on. I see mercy and love everywhere in David's story.

Then I looked back at Moses, the Exodus, the book of Judges and then I slowly began to move forward, in historical order, through the prophets. Again, everywhere I find mercy, promises of love, forgiveness and restoration.

There is no shortage of grace in the Old Testament. It was just that no one could be sanctified through it yet.

Do you know how long it took the Lord to send the people of Isra'el into captivity for their disobedience? From the time Moses took the people out of Egypt to the last Babylonian captivity which took out Judah, was roughly 849 years. I can get really mad in under eight seconds.

A harsh, angry, judgemental God would not wait that long to act. Our God did,

The point at which the northern tribes of Isra'el and the southern tribes of Judah went into their captivities, was the point where the people had become so depraved, the temple was filled with foreign gods which represented murderous and immoral practices, and even God's own priests had become murderers. The people had reached a point of blackness and depravity not seen in our western culture. They could no longer be reached. So God punished them, knowing that through His word and the prophets, that some would realise their suffering was because they had forsaken their God and their promises.

That meant that at least some people and future generations were saved to regenerate a relationship with the Lord, and to ensure the survival of the nation of Isra'el, living within God's covenant promises. Had God not acted, none would have been saved.

That is patience on a scale I can't comprehend.

So that is what I learned. That throughout all the bad old days, the love of the Lord was as committed, strong and beautiful as it is now. I no longer see a division between the behaviour of an Old Testament and New Testament God. I can see how it is the same God, Yahweh, who has been striving with mankind against all odds, and because of His unfailing love and mercy, I now serve Him.

Do you want to know what the next lesson after that revelation was? How desperately both God the Father and Jesus, the Messiah, must be awaiting the coming of Jesus, so they can upgrade mankind's spiritual condition to a higher level of safety and intimacy with Him, again.



"How Long?" When Answers to Prayer Don't Seem to Arrive

*"O LORD, why do you stand so far away?
Why do you hide when I am in trouble?" Psalm 10:1*

One morning, as I was sick and faced with a scary, roulette wheel decision on which medication would or wouldn't work, I felt exactly like David did in Psalm 6. Worn out, scared and hopeless. I prayed for wisdom and no answer came. Feeling desperate I thought, *"well, if David didn't always receive answers when he so desperately needed it, then there's no hope for me to get one."* I don't even begin to compare with the honour David has in the Lord's eyes, but to my surprise, God answered me. A calm voice said, *"sometimes I can't give answers."*

I survived the problem without damage and began to explore why God couldn't answer. The more I thought about it, the simpler the answer was... then the more complex it became. "How long" is a God-sized issue with a God-sized answer! There are so many factors which may stop His answering us in the manner we want:

- God won't stomp on our free will;
- His actions are stopping us from being greedy or stupid in some way;
- the timing is wrong;
- we need this to grow;
- there is a better plan in God's heart, than the rescue we long for;
- other's free will's hijacks or affects us and God can't override that; or
- to get to the right answer involves multiple decisions and/or steps, which have to be done in the right way, in the right time. We can't just jump to a final result and lastly,
- we have to learn obedience to the Lord: He doesn't come when we call, it's the other way around. (This is probably one of the reasons David had frequent trouble getting answers, he had to learn which King had the highest status and that he had to wait on God, God could not be summoned to him.)

If you were to chart the whole path of any event, particularly those involving more than one person, your brain would spin. There is too much information. Overload and confusion would be imminent. Thankfully, God takes care of all the behind the scenes issues, that we can't handle. We can't access the full data which He plans with and we shouldn't try to.

Putting this issue simply, firstly the Lord has to allow us free will. He aids and comforts us as much as possible, (or as much as He is able to help our stubborn heads and hearts;) but we are meant to stand on our own two feet and grow up. We have to make our own choices and mistakes. So that is one reason why He may abstain from an instant, heroic rescue. If He stepped in too often and gave us every answer, we'd soon complain about losing our rights, being treated like incapable children, or not being given space to grow.

Secondly, behind the scenes are many complex factors that influence His ability to answer. There may be a simple solution, but if we are told it at the wrong time, then it would fail. As I said above, getting to the point where the answer is effective may take multiple decisions, a series of steps, timing, and/or change/s made by other parties (who also have their own free wills.) This is where the complexity really kicks in.

Thirdly, what God is doing can be incredibly obvious, we are just too anxious or biased towards our desires, to see it.

When we get stressed, we see only one factor: our need and how long it's taking to meet it. All the machinations of what's happening in the background, from all sides... and what God really is doing to effectively deal with it, is safely hidden from us. Please note the word safely.

Life has enough troubles. Bless God that He has set limits on what we have to deal with.

God knows the answers to every problem in an instant; technically, before it even happened. He knows where you need help the most and will be working on the very best possible answer, you just can't see it. So we stress out, as David did many times.

*"O LORD, do not stay far away!
You are my strength; come quickly to my aid!" Psalm 22:19*

So next time you feel abandoned by the Lord, remember, what is happening in the background would probably confuse you and create additional headaches. Apparent silence should never be taken to imply indifference. It is a matter of timing, God making the most of the best choices and acting with loving care.

Take your worries to the Lord, ask for His lead in what to do and let Him take control (within the free will boundaries He has set). He'll move all the pieces into place that He can and do a better job than you expect. Then you will be able to join David in saying, *"In panic I cried out, 'I am cut off from the LORD!' But You heard my cry for mercy and answered my call for help."* Psalm 31:22



Why Christians Still Need the Laws Set Down Through Moses

*"Show me the right path, O LORD;
point out the road for me to follow.
Lead me by Your truth and teach me,
for You are the God who saves me.
All day long I put my hope in You."* Psalm 25:4-5

With the exception of the ten commandments, we tend to see most of the laws God gave through Moses as irrelevant, as we are justified by grace. I have needed to study the Torah (the first five books of the Bible,) to understand David's actions and mindset; to my surprise, I have found that they make me feel more secure. I don't need the Old Testament for just the feel-good Scriptures about how much God loves me, and what He wants to give me, I need the hazard warnings too. They are making how I relate to the world easier.

Western society in 2015, even for Christians, is very permissive. We live under the pressures of anti-discrimination and tolerance philosophies, and most of the time, they are excellent attitudes which do serve society well. However, as we were warned when political correctness began to become a societal standard, our willingness to include and accept everyone as they are, has indeed subtly eroded our understanding of what is sinful.

It's become harder and harder to know where the lines should be drawn. I know what is wrong and right, but the part of my brain which has been taught by society to be empathetic, worries too much about offending, when instead, it should be identifying where the Word of God stands, and being brave enough to publicly say, "no."

When the Lord bought Israel out of slavery in Egypt, He was dealing with a nation who had lost their sense of right and wrong. They were Hebrews living as Egyptians, in the same way that we are Christians, living as westerners. They took on the local foods, manner of dress, customs, social standards and culture, just as we have... and they had to be delivered from it. Not only that, but when you look at the masses of rules set down, they also had to be re-taught how to live as God's people, with Godly attitudes and proper morals.

The Lord taught the 'young' Israelites everything they needed to know, right down to how to handle disease, how to avoid the risks of food poisoning and parasites in food, acceptable moral standards etc. They are sometimes referred to as the 'children of Israel,' as they were the same as small children, who need to be bought up to know what was safe, and what was not. The young Isra'el also underwent hard training regarding the consequences of their actions, and had to learn obedience in small steps. Even then, they failed, as their sinful natures took over.

Even when Israel had grown into a mighty nation, and to this day, for our protection, we still need a loving Father to say, "no!" When the world starts to overwhelm our Godly mindsets, we must go back to the Word to be set on the right path again. The Torah is as relevant now in 2015, as it ever has been, and David relied on it heavily, to determine how to rule God's people.

*"Your regulations remain true to this day,
for everything serves Your plans.
If your instructions hadn't sustained me with joy,*

I would have died in my misery." Psalm 119:91-92 (This Psalm is thought to belong to David, because the wording matches his style.)

For many controversial moral situations, the Torah has a simple answer, which often is an outright no, for reasons which are best known to the Lord. Like the ten commandments, some rules were made for all time periods, and hot topics such as the sexual morality (not purification) laws are included in that. [Ref. Leviticus 18] I don't have to know and understand absolutely every reason why God has forbidden some things, in order to decide what stand I should take on those issues.

*The LORD says, "I will guide you along the best pathway for your life.
I will advise you and watch over you.
Do not be like a senseless horse or mule
that needs a bit and bridle to keep it under control."* Psalm 32:8-9

Where areas appear grey or discriminatory, I have to trust that the Lord knows what He is doing. Just because I don't understand every factor behind why the Lord made any moral or ethical decision, should not make it questionable, or open to being changed and compromised by current ideas.

I don't understand how quarks work or behave, but I trust God that He made physics to perform perfectly, and that the building blocks of the universe work to His design. So why have we stopped trusting His moral wisdom, when the rest of His plan for creation works so well? We're fine with the natural systems and don't question His wisdom there. (Except maybe for mosquitoes, fleas and snakes, but they do have their place. So I am reliably told.)

*"As pressure and stress bear down on me,
I find joy in Your commands.
Your laws are always right;
help me to understand them so I may live."* Psalm 119:143-144

Standards on stealing, murder, lies, social responsibility and fairness have also stayed the same. Even though we are made right with God through grace, the baselines of our faith have not changed. [See also Romans 1:8 to 2:16.] As Paul discusses the issue of sin in Romans 3, he quotes parts of Psalms 14, 5, 10 and 36, This demonstrates the New Testament relevance of the principles found in the Torah.

We need to go back to the Torah more, and allow the Lord to take Egypt out of us.

"Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do. This is my command—be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." Joshua 1:8-9



When You Can't Be An Overcomer: Coping With Spiritual Failures

In 1996, I wrote an article called "spiritually correct is." I was exploring some of the attitudes our church had then, which were generated far more by peer pressure, than Scripture.

Not all peer pressure is bad. The standards set by a group can be a force for good, which supports and encourages people. However, sometimes we take a positive spiritual principle and carry it too far, placing expectations on people that they can't carry comfortably.

Here are two of the points which came up on my list:

- ❖ Putting on a 'praise the Lord' face and false demeanour, rather than being honest about where you're at.
- ❖ Faking faith in areas you have trouble trusting God in.

Regardless of what denomination you call home, I am sure you have experienced, or seen this in action: or you have done it yourself.

My church was very keen on being an overcomer. This popular coping mechanism came from Scriptures such as: *"I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you."* Luke 10:19 and *"You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."* 1 John 4:4

We sang songs about being an overcomer, and it became the 'must have' attitude to use with everything. I still listen to songs on the theme. As I write this in 2015, there is one on my current favourites playlist, by Mandisa. I think it's a great attitude to have, however, when I'm having trouble meeting that bar... and it can be a very high bar to jump, falling short potentially lands me in a great deal of guilt.

My full time work is studying and writing about King David. It may seem like an easy task, but sometimes I have really bad days. The enemy is no fan of the Word of God, so my computer malfunctions, huge bills arrive, my pain levels shoot up, the negativity on social media starts to get me down... then working from home develops serious drawbacks... There have been times when I have violently hit the wall. I have many buttons which can be pushed, and some weeks, they all seem to get hit in rapid succession. I can find it next to impossible to cope.

To stay afloat, I listen to the voices of encouragement around me. My church life tells me I am an overcomer. So I hook into praying and my praise and worship music. But some days, that is just not enough. I am still slammed up against that wall, feeling wretched. It's fine to think positive, but I still have to find money, apologise to my husband, fix that computer which will take hours, (it was days), and I want to scream, "somebody make it stop already!"

So I have a choice. Do I feel guilty because I haven't functioned as a victorious overcomer, or do I get honest with God?

The benefit of working with the Psalms echoing in my head, is when those bad days hit, David himself, helps to relieve my spiritual-failure guilt. Here are other Scriptures about overcoming. This first one is Psalm 13:3-4, written on a very bad day, with a heavy, discouraged heart:

*"Look on me and answer, Lord my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
and my foes will rejoice when I fall." (NIV)*

*"The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me; I was overcome by distress and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the Lord: "Lord, save me!"
Psalm 116:3*

When I read about David struggling: the one who won against Goliath, the one who is the grandfather of Christ, our Messiah... the one who seemed to ace everything and bounce back from any disaster... I realise that that being an overcomer is a process and you don't get it right straight away. You don't have to get it right - straight away. - No one has ever asked you to from the Bible!

You don't bounce back up as a victor, until you hit the mat in anguish.

David says:

*"Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am faint;
heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony.
My soul is in deep anguish.
How long, Lord, how long?" Psalm 6:2-3*

What the overcomer mindset wants immediately is this:

*"But let all who take refuge in you be glad;
let them ever sing for joy.
Spread your protection over them,
that those who love your name may rejoice in you.
Surely, Lord, you bless the righteous;
you surround them with your favour as with a shield." Psalm 5:11-12*

Achieving victory and success takes time and you get to develop a lot of wisdom in the process. God has to move all the pieces on the chessboard into the right position, before He can give you the answer you seek; and when blessing comes, it may not look exactly as you expected it to look. If you are fixated on one answer, you may not recognise your victory when it does arrive. As wise people say, we don't always get what we want, we get what we need.

When you hit the dust, feeling like a miserable failure with no spiritual muscle, remember that you are in excellent company. David was given the highest honours of anyone in the Bible, (except for Jesus, of course.) If he can be swallowed by discouragement and come out of it victorious, then we all can. Just do as he did and don't stop praying, praising and seeking God. That is the key to being a genuine overcomer.

"David's Last Words

These are the last words of David:

"The inspired utterance of David son of Jesse,

*the utterance of the man exalted by the Most High,
the man anointed by the God of Jacob,
the hero of Israel's songs:
"The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me;
his word was on my tongue.
The God of Israel spoke,
the Rock of Israel said to me:
'When one rules over people in righteousness,
when he rules in the fear of God,
he is like the light of morning at sunrise
on a cloudless morning,
like the brightness after rain
that brings grass from the earth.'
"If my house were not right with God,
surely he would not have made with me an everlasting covenant,
arranged and secured in every part;
surely he would not bring to fruition my salvation
and grant me my every desire.
But evil men are all to be cast aside like thorns,
which are not gathered with the hand.
Whoever touches thorns
uses a tool of iron or the shaft of a spear;
they are burned up where they lie." 2 Samuel 23:1-7*



“But I Will Trust in You...” King David and the Art of Bouncing Back

*“...I praise the LORD for what He has promised.
I trust in God, so why should I be afraid?
What can mere mortals do to me?
I will fulfil my vows to You, O God,
and will offer a sacrifice of thanks for Your help.
For You have rescued me from death;
You have kept my feet from slipping.
So now I can walk in Your presence, O God,
in Your life-giving light.” Psalm 56:10-13*

When I was first getting to know David's full life story, I heard a Rabbi say that David had endured a very hard life. I have to agree. He left a life of obscurity to follow a promise from the Lord, but along the way suffered demotions, multiple assassination attempts, long-term separation from his first wife, many years in hiding fearing for his life, wars, the death of at least four of his sons, long-term serious health problems, three uprisings against his kingship, multiple persecutions because of his faith... plus all the usual popularity and approval issues, which go with being the leader of a nation.

Aside from those problems, he dealt with some of the most toxic forms of stress which are commonly considered to be killers. His sources of stress were:

- ❖ constant,
- ❖ unpredictable and
- ❖ uncontrollable.

That he died in old age, having cleared the nation of its enemies and having achieved so much for the Lord, is nothing short of a providential miracle.

Or could there be more to it than that?

When the Psalms are being dissected and preached about, there is nearly always an admiring acknowledgement of David's ability to bounce back up while appearing to be sinking. Here is another example.

*“O LORD, how long will You forget me? Forever?
How long will You look the other way?
How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul,
with sorrow in my heart every day?
How long will my enemy have the upper hand?
Turn and answer me, O LORD my God!
Restore the sparkle to my eyes, or I will die.
Don't let my enemies gloat, saying, “We have defeated him!”
Don't let them rejoice at my downfall.
But I trust in Your unfailing love.
I will rejoice because You have rescued me.
I will sing to the LORD
because He is good to me.” Psalm 13*

David pushes himself from despair to hope in a manner which has been said to appear bipolar. He isn't bipolar in any respect. David knew how to pump up his morale. He did it

by reflecting on his past victories and by trusting the Lord, through prayer and praise. David also constantly turned to the Lord for direction, comfort and grounding and despite persecution from his own people over his unrelenting faith in God, he publicly praised the Lord and pointed the hearts of the people towards Him. (See the chapter on persecution.) He is inspirational.

As psychology has grown, researchers have spent more and more time looking at the positive aspects of human behaviour, rather than staying focussed on what can go wrong. Their findings help explain why David was able to keep his head above water, despite the forces that worked against him. In 2006 Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun studied post traumatic growth, which is exactly what David experienced many times. This growth results in a positive attribute termed resilience.

Resilience is when you fall down, but get up, and are able to do that repeatedly, becoming stronger each time you arise. It means expecting positive outcomes, despite the risks and stresses that come your way. It involves an ability to adapt when you just have to make the best of a tough situation and clinging onto your purpose in life.

Tedeschi and Calhoun's work beautifully describes how resilience is enabled. While at first people may show high stress signs and be depressed or overwhelmed by what they have been through, in time they can grow to come through with:

- "Increased perception of competence and self-reliance.
- Enhanced acceptance of one's vulnerability and negative emotional experiences.
- Improved relationships with significant others.
- Increased compassion and empathy for others.
- Greater efforts directed at improving relationships.
- Increased appreciation of own existence.
- Greater appreciation for life.
- Positive changes in one's priorities.
- Stronger religious/spiritual beliefs.
- Greater personal intimacy with God.
- Greater sense of control and security through belief in God.
- Greater meaning about life and suffering through religion."

If David was writing this, I am sure that he would emphasise the last four points, as he repeatedly did in the Psalms. It was faith that gave him the greatest lift; however, his own personality traits of perseverance, willingness to take action, empathy, teachability and bravery, also had an important impact on his resilience. The Lord moulds us like a potter moulds clay, but the process works better if the quality of the clay is good.

To be resilient, David also needed supportive people around him such as Samuel, Nathan, Hushai the Archite and Jonathan; and resilient role models. His mother is mentioned as a role model in Psalms 116:16: *"Truly I am your servant, Lord; I serve you just as my mother did; you have freed me from my chains;"* and 86:16.

How David dealt with his mistakes was also a major factor in determining his success. A positive attitude to mistakes has been found to enable people to make better choices in the future, which in turn increases their overall happiness and ability to function in life. Belting yourself up with guilt only sends you backwards. David responded to corrections by

Abigail and Nathan and was always able to get back up on his feet, no matter what hardship or grief hit him. [Refs. 1 Samuel 25 and 2 Samuel 12]

If you feel you are low on resilience, take heart. According to the research, resilience can be taught and role modelled. Studying David's life has certainly helped boost my resilience. I am inspired by his courage, gently rebuked by his righteous responses to stressful situations and comforted by his trust in the Lord. He is a blessing that has never stopped giving.

Notes:

Helpful References to assist you in understanding the topic further.

- Post Traumatic Growth: <http://www.posttraumaticgrowth.com>
- Firdaus Dhabhar: The positive effects of stress: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsc83N-Q1q4>
- Kelly McGonigal: How to make stress your friend: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcGyVTAoXEU>
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- Resilience Videos on TED Talks: Search via https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=resilience+ted or enter "resilience TED" into search box.

Author Biography

Cate Russell-Cole has been a Christian since 1981 and is a qualified Creativity Coach, Author, Editor and Social Worker. She has been actively involved in church life since her teenage years and has served the Lord as a youth leader, desktop publisher, administrative assistant, writer, church reporter, magazine editor ("YOU" and "Echo" Lifehouse Christian Church, Coffs Harbour), intercessor, Sunday School teacher, ISCF leader and youth prayer coordinator.



Until early in 2015, Cate coached writers online through her CommuniCATE Resources for Writers blog, with a blog and social media following of over seven thousand people. Her commercial work had to be stopped due to chronic health problems, so instead, she followed her heart and devoted all her time to King David.

God once gave Cate a vision which encapsulates her journey in the Lord. She was standing on top of a mountain, with just enough room around her feet that she wasn't scared of falling off. In front of her there was a bridge that led to the throne of God, and when she looked up, she could see Jesus and the Father. When Cate looked down, the sides of the mountain were covered with nothing but knife sharp, pieces of jagged rock. There was no room to get a safe handhold. She couldn't go up or down without being cut to pieces. Jesus then said to her, "that is what I have bought you out of."

Cate lives in Brisbane, Australia with her husband and two cats and habitually writes everything in Australian English.

Over her career as a teacher and writer, she has researched, written and taught five creativity-orientated courses; worked as a freelance writer, graphic designer, desktop publisher and has authored ten non-fiction books. Privately, she is a Christian science fiction/ fantasy author who was working on The Chronicles of Mirchar Series. Cate has a love of the science fiction - fantasy genre and has been writing diaries, appalling poetry and short stories since she was a child.

Other Publications by Cate Russell-Cole

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- [At The Fence](#): Cate wrote a monthly column for three years.
- The Alternative National Australian Christian Newspaper
- Christian Woman Magazine, Australia
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- Challenge Magazine, Western Australia
- Faith Lifts
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- Coffs Harbour Christian Life Centre, now Lifehouse.
- Networking News, Coffs Harbour
- Business Support Network Newsletter
- Outreach, Cate's previous business newsletter



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From Despair to Deliverance: the King David Project

“From Despair to Deliverance: the King David Project” is a non-profit initiative, that seeks to make the life of King David easy to understand and relevant, so that believers gain inspiration and comfort from the life of King David.

I have always loved David: he has taught me to worship and the Psalms keep me afloat through many trying times. Late November 2014, I was writing my second novel, which had David in it as a character, and I hit a wall of dissatisfaction. Realising that what I had really wanted to do was write about King David, not my series, I decided to abandon the novels and study his life in depth.

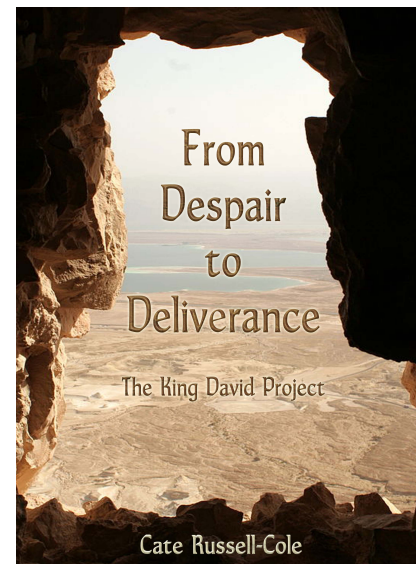
Along that journey, I have found a great deal of misinformation and rumour, plus a lack of simple resources on David’s life. So in January 2015, I began to build a web site to share what I’ve learnt as a Creative Commons enterprise. The site has been successful and I have also branched into the psychology behind David’s story. In late 2015 the Masada Rain blog was started to house all the additional, useful pieces of information that couldn’t fit on the site, and to record my journey.

The biggest problem in understanding King David’s life is that there is so much detail and not enough detail! Explanations are housed in words which are easily missed in the text; plus as chapters sit end to end, timing is lost. This site sources many opinions, both Jewish and Christian and hopefully will provide clarity on some of the sticky areas that Bible readers struggle with.

The title “From Despair to Deliverance” was prayerfully chosen as it represents:

1. the repeated passages of growth in David’s life, from pain to joy, despair to deliverance;
2. how learning about King David can help us move from despair to deliverance (and joy,) in our own walk with God, and
3. this also applies to the nation of Isra’el, who God was moving to a place of prosperity and safety through David’s kingship.

This is a non-profit initiative and you can use the content any way you wish.



Project Links:

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